

The First Movement of the Odyssey

by Crazy-88

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Summary: "You are the Fifth Race. Your role is clear. If there is any hope in preserving the future, it lies with you and your people" Because all it takes is one ship. Perhaps in the wrong place... But unquestionably, at the right time.

1. Chapter 1

So, new story! I'll be posting its chapters at a rate of about one per week until I catch up to where I have written.

This is a HALO - SG1 crossover set during the Fall of Reach on the Halo side, and at the end of Season 10 of Stargate on their side. It was partially a reaction to the horribly clumsy way the Bungie team took the quite decent Eric Nylund book and essentially threw it out to make the rather poor 'REACH' ... but didn't have the guts to at least go all the way, instead actually trying to mash the two of them together ... and doing so in such a horribly sloppy and amateurish way I was hard pressed to credit this was their work.

So this crossover _is also _something of an attempt to better stitch together TFOR and REACH - though leaning more towards the former than the later in general. With Stargate mixed in of course.

The story has a clear beginning, middle and end that leaves it open for sequels - if I go there...but lets get the beginning posted first :)

Enjoy!

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****Chapter 1.**** Valhalla.

****1202 Hours, March 13, 2010 (Stargate Relative Timeframe) /
>USS _**Odyssey**_**, Orillia System, Asgard Space.****

"You _must_ go"

The final words history would record from the Asgard echoed off the dull walls of the _Odysseys_ primary computer room as Thor, the Supreme Commander of the Asgard fleet, vanished into legend in the shimmer of an Asgard transporter beam. Lieutenant-Colonel Samantha Carter stared at the empty space Thor had occupied for several seconds before letting her training kick in, turning to face the primary Asgard console that had been installed over the last few days as the _Odyssey_ rocked under her, pushing aside the feelings of dread and loss that had flared up as Thor transported back to his Homeworld for what she somehow knew would be the last time.

"Sir, the Asgard have just disembarked" she called into the communications line with the bridge, her fingers flying across the console and tapping several Norse looking runes in rapid succession, a schematic of the _Daedalus_ class engine array flashing yellow before switching to a green hue, English and Asgard diagnostic data scrolling down the side of the screen as power was rerouted from the ships Asuran Zero Point Energy Module to the primary Hyperspace window generators. "He told us that we needed to leave, _now_. I'm bringing the Hyperdrive online—we should be ready to jump in twenty seconds".

Several hundred meters away on the ships bridge, Major General Hank Landry noted the statement as he sat down in the ships command chair, glancing towards the navigational console, making a quick and easy decision based on the tactical display and Carters relayed advice from Thor as the ship rocked under her.

"Bring sub-light engines to full military thrust, get us clear of the planet" he ordered curtly, trying his best not to show any sign of discomfort at the position he had found himself in by default. The ships nominal commander Colonel Ian Davidson who had replaced the late Colonel Paul Emerson had been injured during a skirmish with the Lucian Alliance earlier this week. With the _Odyssey_ the only ship both available and able to reach the Asgard homeworld for the urgent discussions they had requested, the Pentagon in typical REMF fashion hadn't seen the need to recall either Colonel Caldwell or Colonel Ellis back to Earth and take command, given that they were on critical missions of their own and this was a non-combat assignment...

As he stared at the icons of no less than three Ori Motherships bearing down on the _Odyssey_, Landry made a mental note to find whichever officer at the Pentagon had drawn up the tasking orders and punch them.

Assuming he survived the next few minutes anyway, but if nothing else at least he had a trained crew who knew what they were doing.

"Military thrust" Marks acknowledged the order with the calm assurance of a veteran of his trade, squeezing the trigger on his throttle and sliding it briskly forward as he pulled the control yoke into a turn, the sublight engine array at the rear of the ship coming to life in response and starting to push the Battle Cruiser out of its inertia held position above Orilla into a hard turn away from the planet. "Laying in a reciprocal course to Earth, we'll be ready as soon as the Hyperdrive comes online".

Two of the giant Ori Jugernaughts ignored them, decelerating into a descent path towards the surface of the planet, but the third ship banked onto a pursuit course with the persistence of a dog on the trail of a mailman, golden spears of energy streaming from its bow mounted energy cannon as it fired speculative ranging shots, Odyssey shuddering as one shot connected.

"Shields down to eighty six percent" Marks called out as the Ori weapons fire sliced across the defensive grid, but he corrected for the impact with deft hands, resisting the urge to try and evade any harder than the slight attitude and profile adjustments he was making as the enemy fired. Any hard maneuvering would only let the Ori ship close the gap between them as it ran a straight line, bringing its weapons into optimal range swiftly, so he grit his teeth and kept working on presenting a minimal target profile, while silently praying for the ships new Hyperdrive to come online faster.

"How the hell did they find us?" Lieutenant-Colonel Cameron Mitchell demanded of anyone and everyone on the bridge as the ship shuddered yet again, the Ori Mothership getting closer clearly improving its aim as the planet receded behind them. "We're way outside the Milky Way, the Ori shouldn't be anywhere near here!"

"The hell if I know Colonel" Landry replied with a shrug as the ship steadied. "And I wasn't planning on waiting around here to ask them".

"I hear that" the junior officer agreed, holding on to the back of the Generals command chair as the ship rocked again, the thunder of the impact quickly replaced with the far more welcome sound of the ships Hyperdrive finally powering up deep in the bowels of the ship. "And I think it's about time to leave this party".

"Sir, Hyperdrive is a go..." Marks reported with a tone of uncertainty in his voice as several sensor readouts on his console suddenly spiked from zero to very large numbers in the space of a few seconds, "but I'm detecting a massive buildup of energy coming from the planet..."

Landry froze in the motion of opening his mouth to ask for more details, as the part of his mind that had gone to War College started shouting very loudly. Thor's insistence for them to leave the area at once, the impending mass suicide of the Asgard they had been originally asked to witness...and the twin Ori ships now entering the Asgard Homeworld's upper atmosphere that were not getting so much as

a BB gun turned against them.

Sun Tzu had said long ago that the most dangerous enemy was one who had nothing left to lose...and for an entire species whose only remaining choice was not _if _to die, but _when_

"Engage the Hyperdrive, _now!_" he half shouted half snapped, almost coming out of his command chair as all decorum and dignity of his rank was pushed aside with the revelation that they had mere seconds to react before they were _dead_.

"Engaged!" Marks half shouted back, jolted by the sheer authority in the order to point to slam the appropriate switch forward almost to the point of snapping it off but the ships autopilot didn't care and executed the instruction, focusing invisible streams of energy directly in front of the ship until the fabric of space twisted open with the purple flash of a hyperspace window.

But even as _Odyssey _opened and started to move through the subspace doorway, devices the Asgard had built over the last few months finished powering up, sending a byproduct wave of exotic radiation out through the system, saturating the hyperspace window and disrupting it in ways not even the highly sophisticated Asgard systems could compensate for before the _Odyssey_ slid out of real space, barely dodging the final parting shot from their doggedly pursuing Ori friends as they powered their own Hyperdrive to pursue.

A heartbeat later, the devices activated for the first and last time.

It would have been some measure of pride perhaps to the Asgard that the devices worked precisely as they had been engineered without fail, but events moved far too fast for any being of flesh and blood to witness what happened as a series of enormous explosions materialized across the surface of the planet, sending a series of energy compression waves deep into the planet, painstakingly timed to account for density and a dozen other factors and hit the planetary core at precisely the same moment. The two Ori ships descending through the atmosphere to claim their prize didn't have time to react, let alone understand their sensor data, as the energy waves s_queezed_ the Neutronium rich sphere at the center of Orilla and brought it to a critical mass density less than two seconds after the initial explosions.

The results were appropriately spectacular.

A titanic shockwave tore the planet apart in a fireball of blue/white light, the enormous energy released consuming the three Ori ships in a heartbeat and providing an appropriate escort for the Asgard as they rode to Valhalla over the corpses of their enemies, moving from the races counted among living to legends of the past on their own terms both unbowed and unbroken.

But as carefully as the Asgard had decided their doom, one variable had never been considered; that of the effects of the detonation of an active Hyperspace window. The initial radiation pulse continued to cycle through the _Odyssey's_ Hyperdrive systems like a barely controlled tempest, saturating the subspace bubble with enough disrupting radiation to have torn the ship to pieces if not for the

highly sophisticated Asgard Core that had jumped into action within nanoseconds, working to stabilize the field and keep the ship in one piece and not several trillion. Given time, it probably would have succeeded in dissipating the radiation without further incident, letting the ship ride out the aftereffects long enough to drop back into real space and repair any damage that may have been incurred to the hyperdrive systems.

Synchronicity however reared its ugly head, as in a universe infinity distant yet as close as the thickness of a piece of paper, a matching burst of exotic radiation was generated from deep under the surface of a world under siege, unknown to either besieged or besieger, a legacy of a long lost civilization that was none the less at the heart of their conflict. Both pulses rippled along their side of the Subspace layer, weakening the Subspace barrier between worlds.

Even this would never have been enough to cause any problems...if not for the presence of the _Odyssey_ and the bubble around it seething with the same radiation that acted for the world like some kind of inter-universal short circuit, snapping the _Odyssey_ from one side of the barrier to the other, and pulling it back to the genesis of the pulse in this new universe.

Of course, none of this was actually tangible on the bridge of the _Odyssey_. All the crew saw was the blue/white glow of Hyperspace mutate and shift into a green tunnel blazing with white light, the sight chillingly familiar to Daniel Jackson as he recalled a similar escape from the Vorash system many years ago, before it just as suddenly collapsed with a final blinding flash back into the more familiar and welcome vista of a Starfield.

"...Okay...so _that_ just happened..." Cameron Mitchell spoke up slowly as he looked around the silent and somewhat confused atmosphere on the bridge, broken only by the insistent chiming of alarms from just about every console across the bridge.

"People, I need damage reports and systems status reports, right now" Landry ordered somewhat calmly as he shook off his own surprise at the events, the crew immediately falling back on their training and getting to work, the alarms ceasing one after the other as they were cleared and systems reset. "Colonel Carter" he continued, tapping open again the link between the systems room and bridge as he quickly sought an expert (or more accurately, _the_ _expert_) opinion, "please explain to me what in the _hell_ just happened?"

"I'm going over the system logs now" the distant voice of the Colonel replied after a moment. "It looks like the Hyperdrive fail-safe's kicked in and brought us out of hyperspace after a radiation surge of some kind disrupted our Subspace window. We got lucky Sir, if the automatic systems hadn't reacted and dealt with the situation, I don't know _what_ might have happened".

"What about the Hyperdrive itself" Landry pressed, the thought of being stuck between worlds not the most appealing to him at this moment. "Is it intact? Any other major systems damage?"

"It seems to be intact" Carter replied after a slightly longer hesitation. "I'm going to have to run some checks before I can tell for certain".

The '_Please shut up and let me work...Sir'_ hint in his subordinates voice wasn't exactly subtle, but Landry knew he deserved the rebuke.

"Very well" he replied, "let me know as soon as you have a status report. Landry Out" he said, cutting the channel and turning his gaze across the rest of the bridge. "Everyone else, by stations, give me a status check".

"Shields at sixty five percent and holding" Captain Megan Cooper repotted from her seat next to Marks as she read over her control boards with a rapid, but well trained eye. "Minor damage to the hull on the port 302 bay, but there is no breach. Primary sensors are offline -looks like they were overloaded by the detonation of the Asgard homeworld, but they should be back up in a few moments. The Hyperdrive has been totally SCRAMED by the computerâ€|no other damage on my board".

"Sirâ€|" Marks put in as he looked over his own boards, a frown starting to work its way onto his face again, "I'm trying to get a position fix on where we are. But according to the inertial displacement readings, we've just traveled over six _million_ light years; we're back inside the Milky Way Galaxy".

"Should not this ship have taken many hours to return to the Milky Way Galaxy?" Teal'c pointed out as he stepped up, his head tilted in a quizzical fashion as he considered the information presented.

"Should have" Mitchell confirmed with a frown, moving up to Marks' console with a frown on his face as the other, without being asked, started diagnostics on the appropriate subsystems. "That can't be right..."

"Well assuming it _is_ right" Daniel put in, "I'd suggest we contact Earth, in case we need assistance. They're only around the corner".

"Good idea" Landry approved. "Cooper, open up a Subspace link to the SGC and tell Colonels Reynolds, Pierce and Dixon to stop playing poker on my desk".

The other worked her console with a suppressed smile at that, but the smile quickly turned into a frown.

"Sir...I can't raise the SGC" she said, working her systems carefully. "Diagnostics show the subspace communications system is online and transmitting...but I'm not getting any response".

"Try someone else with a subspace communications link" Mitchell suggested. "Vandenberg? Area-51? The Ancient Outpost?"

"I am Sir...but _none_ of them are responding" Cooper said, her frown deepening as she called up diagnostic windows. "The communications array has to be damaged somehow..."

Mostly unnoticed by everyone as the discussion continued, Valla Maldoran walked up to the floor to ceiling viewport at the front of the bridge that looked over the bow of the ship. Ignoring the increasing chatter behind her, she studied the star field carefully.

As much as she loathed Qetesh and what he had cost her over her life, she was ruthlessly pragmatic enough to use the skills and knowledge she had retained from her former Goa'uld, including an almost instinctive knowledge of spatial positioning and soon enough she plotted enough familiar constellations to roughly triangulate their position as somewhere within Earth's neighborhood, placing them unquestionably back in the Milky Way.

Nodding to herself with that sorted and feeling much better about being back in an area of the Universe she knew and could survive in, she started to turn away from the window, when a flash out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. Frowning slightly, she leaned against the window and tried to look 'around' the ship, her eyes widening as she finally noticed the orb in the distance to Port that was almost certainly a planet, but that wasn't what interested her.

No, it was the soft, tiny pinpricks of light wreathing the world that she could see that gained her full and absolute attention, rippling around said planet like a glittering halo, an effect she recognized from all too many experiences as a major space engagement well underway.

"Well that doesn't look too promising" she absently commented without turning around, her attention focused on the spectacle outside as she tried to get an idea of the scope of the battle...and she didn't particularly like the answers to those questions as the number and size of explosions utterly destroyed any idea that this was a limited skirmish between a few ships.

But _who_?

**0620 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>UNSC _**Pillar of Autumn**_**, Epsilon Eridani System**

The _Pillar of Autumn_ detonated its port emergency thrusters, a mixture of trihydride tetazine and hydrogen peroxide combining and exploding against the cruiser's spaceframe, shoving the _Halcyon_ class Cruiser out of the way of a brilliant lance of pure white energy that should have skewered her from bow to stern.

The fact that the lethal blast of energy _hadn't_ connected could be attributed to a tiny purple figure on the ship's command deck standing inside her holographic tank. Or, more accurately, to the chip of crystal computer core secured under it, but such distinctions came down more to semantics than anything else where AI's were concerned.

Analyzing the results of her somewhat innovative maneuvering, Cortana frowned slightly as she poured over the sensor data, studying the beam's energy buildup cycle and discharge pattern, comparing the data gathered to the assumptions she had made in the milliseconds before having to commit and extrapolated an improved predictive model to base her decisions off. A hundred thousand simulations later, she was much more confident in her ability to dodge the next beam that would no doubt be coming their way soon.

And the one she expected to come after that. After all, the Covenant were nothing if not doggedly persistent in trying to kill anyone not part of their Empire.

By that point however, she estimated they should be in close enough range for Captain Keyes to do what he did best and bring the enemy 'Sniper' ship under their guns where it could be riddled with sufficient firepower to put an end to its interference in the battle around Reach.

"One shot missed" she finally noted to Captain Jacob Keyes a full second after the beam scythed past the ship, such was the speed that she operated at in comparison to the rest of the crew. "Enemy is recharging, time on target thirty seconds".

The Captain simply nodded at her relayed comment, standing up and straightening his uniform, his eyes not leaving the holographic tactical display on the large transparent screen next to them, yet clearly still keeping track of the status reports from his crew and giving out orders when necessary. The battle around Reach's orbital space had thinned out somewhat for now, but that wasn't to say the situation was calm by any means either. The initial damage done by the cloaked Long Night of Solace and the numerous special operations Corvettes it had deployed had finally been mopped up, but the Supercarrier herself had apparently called for backup as it had beaten a hasty retreat through a hole in the orbital defense grid it had punched as UNSC reinforcements had arrived, as a Covenant assault fleet had in turn emerged from Slipspace and moving into the attack barely six hours later, just as the last of the Covenant holdouts on the ground were being squeezed to death by the exhausted ground troops with liberal orbital fire support.

The Autumn had in fact been outbound from Reach at that time, finally released on 'Operation RED FLAG' as the battle around Reach had appeared to move into a mopping up phase, but Keyes had made a surprisingly impulsive command decision to postpone the mission launch until Reach had been cleared of the renewed Covenant attack, something the Spartans on board had unsurprisingly agreed with given that Reach was probably the closest thing to a home any of them had. Beyond that, Cortana could accept his logic; RED FLAG in of itself would be useless if the Covenant took Reach and had an open pathway into the core worlds, and so Keyes had fought his way back to the planet through Covenant search and destroy units, approving John-117's plan to deploy all of the Spartans groundside to defend the power generators for the orbital defense grid, although the Master Chief himself had led a single fire team to Reach Spacedock Gamma at the Anchor-1 shipyard, courtesy of a last minute Alpha-Priority redirect from FLEETCOM. An unsecured NAV database had been detected on the station that the Covenant themselves had detected, and would no doubt move to recover with haste. If they got their hands on it the map to every UNSC world, colony and outpost before John could retrieve or destroy it...

Presently, Cortana shook off the possibility as statistically insignificant, determining a better than ninety percent probability that the Master Chief would accomplish his mission...she just didn't know if the Autumn could accomplish hers.

The renewed Covenant offensive had ground into a battle of attrition shortly after the reinforcement fleet had emerged and pushed in on the planet, one which the massive, but stationary, Super-MAC Battle Stations orbiting the planet had skewed in the UNSC's favor, so much so that the Covenant had apparently broken off rather than press

their attack into the teeth of the UNSC defenses concentrated over Reach's more populated and strategically critical areas.

Captain Keyes had taken two seconds to study then dismiss the Covenant withdrawal as simply a factor of combat losses given their past tendency to keep coming until every one of their ships had been destroyed even if retreating would have made more sense. Studying the disposition of the fleets, he had shifted his attention to Reach's polar regions and after filtering out the magnetic interference, Cortana had quickly locked onto the faint profiles of hundreds of Covenant Phantom and Spirit Dropship tracks trying to sneak through while the UNSC defenders had been occupied. Scores of them had been promptly shot out of space with volleys of Archer Missiles and MAC Slugs as the fleet reacted to their presence and flotillas moved to intercept, but countless others had almost certainly already made it through, wasting little time in moving into combat drops on strategic targets identified by their earlier infiltration force. And with the UN Army and Marine forces scattered across the planet, both depleted from dealing with the earlier infiltration force and woefully out of position both, the Covenant targets had been grossly undefended. FLEETCOM HQ groundside had been overrun within minutes, leaving neither the C4I or intact chain of command to coordinate the defense of critical surface targets, most especially the critical groundside power generators for the orbital defense grid which Cortana put an 80% probability of being the Covenant's primary target.

With the only rapid response force in range that could respond in time, Keyes had authorized the Master Chief's recommendation to deploy Red team groundside to protect the Generator complex buried along the spine of the Highland Mountains, sending the Autumn's ODS Battalion along with them 'to make damn sure it held'...although Cortana couldn't help but wonder if Keyes was simply trying to get them off his ship before it was blown out from under them...

Once again shaking off her reflections as irrelevant and feeling a flush of simulated annoyance at herself for losing focus, Cortana reset her sensor feeds and locked on her primary target. While the rest of the Covenant fleet had fallen back to Reach's first moon Csodaszarvas to lick their wounds at the Supercarrier still orbiting on the far side, they had left behind this 'Supercruiser' as a rearguard, its oversized energy projector working to systematically pick off the UNSC fleet one ship at a time from just outside effective range of the ship-killing orbital defense grid of battle stations and their Mark V 'Super' Magnetic Accelerator Cannons. And at the rate the enemy ship was bleeding the UNSC of ships, the defense grid itself would soon be completely exposed to attack, leaving the fleet neatly impaled on the horns of a dilemma.

Send too few ships out to deal with this enemy ship and it would just pick them off before they got close enough to return fire. Send too many, and the Covenant fleet would no doubt take the opportunity to either engage the UNSC fleet as it moved beyond the covering fire of the orbital grid, or bypass the fleet and hit the orbital grid directly with precision slipspace jumps while it was undefended.

So Captain Keyes had chosen a third option that would have never occurred to her. Send a single ship to deal with the problem.

His ship.

His elegant solution to the slight problem of keeping them alive long enough to do something about this ship, was to leave the emergency thruster controls in her hands, relying on her vastly superior reaction times to dodge the enemy fire before they fired, requiring her to perfectly commit to an action not less than point nine seconds before the enemy weapon discharged, with a roughly one hundred millisecond timeframe to analyze the energy projectors firing cycle, determine roughly where it would project the beam, and take action.

It was a challenge to say the least, but one she relished. She found depressingly few things challenging in her life, such was the cost of being a 5th Generation Smart AI.

"Lieutenant Hikowa" the Captain's orders broke into her musing as he carefully studied the readouts of their opponent, tapping the pipe he carried everywhere in his palm as he talked. "Ready the MAC gun. Arm Archer Missile pods Charlie One through Echo Seven. Give me a firing solution for missiles impacting with our last round".

Cortana felt her emotional subroutines spike to several times their processing power for a few milliseconds before falling back to normal at that order. That would be nearly five-hundred missiles directed at a single target...but there was something to be said for making damn sure their only shot was going to do the job, no matter if it left their ammo reserves dangerously thin for the rest of the battle.

"Fire control online" the Lieutenant confirmed, rapidly entering in the information to the system and releasing the weapons safety locks "Cortana unobtrusively double checking the officer in the background, just to be safe, pleased to see the reputation of the UNSC officer was well deserved as she entered strings of perfectly functional numbers that accounted for the variables quite elegantly. "Missiles armed, ready to fire. MAC gun at 100%, ready to fire".

"Distance, Lieutenant Hall?" Keyes demanded.

"Entering extreme range in fifteen seconds, effective range in-"

Hall was cut off rather suddenly as the ship was kicked half a kilometer straight 'Up' as the Autumns Ventral tanks detonated, a sweeping shot from left to right scathing underneath them, right through where they had been a second ago. Cortana had had calculated a 78% chance based on the ships behavior and typical Covenant doctrine that they would try such a tactic, and was pleased to see her assumptions had again been proven correct, but-

"New contact!" Lieutenant Hall called out as they settled down onto their course again. "Other side of the enemy " it just came out of nowhere, the hull of the Covenant ship must have been blocking it until we shifted our approach aspect-"

"Stay on target!" Keyes ordered quickly, but firmly, keeping his crew focused on the giant killer of ships they were thundering towards. "Cortana?"

Understanding what was being asked of her, she left the crew deal the job of firing the weapons - after spinning off a processing thread to the MAC gun in case she needed to alter the slugs trajectory against the new ship- and started working on the sensor readings. Directing most of her incredible processing power on the new contact, she tore the limited data apart every way over several cycles before hurrying 'back' to the Captain, glancing at him before he had finished saying even the third syllable of her name.

"It's not a Covenant ship" she informed him, noting the relief that passed across his face briefly as she did so, calculating that he had probably started to wonder if he had just fallen into a trap with a second Covenant ship ready to pounce on them as they closed in on the Supercruiser. "I'd guess it's one of ours, but I can't find a profile match in the _Autumns_ database".

"Show me" Keyes ordered with a glance and obediently, Cortana threw the data onto his screen, her attention drawn back as sensor data showed sudden energy surges coming from the Covenant shipâ€¦except as she came within half a heartbeat of throwing the _Autumn_ onto a randomized vector she hesitated, tracking the turret of the energy projector start to turn away from them and towards the other ship.

"The Covenant ship is changing targets" she warned. "It must be targeting the new sensor contact...no profile match, but I'd place a ninety three percent probability on it being human based on general design principals, bringing synthetic aperture radar online for a deep scan..."

"If it's human, it's dead" Hall said grimly. "It's not moving and its almost at point blank range to the enemy".

"Are we in range?" Keyes asked with a quick look at his weapons officer, his face darkening as he did the math in his head, Lieutenant Hikowa grimacing at the same readouts on her board, but nodding none the less.

"Barely, but accuracy is going to be lousy".

"But good enough" Keyes decided, but as he took a breath to order his crew to fire, hoping to throw off the enemy ship as it lined up its shot or at least draw its attention away from the new contact...he knew he was too late.

Because he saw the Covenant ship discharge its energy projector, the visual feed overloading white light.

**0622 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>USS _**Odyssey**_**, Epsilon Eridani System**

"What in the hell is going on?" Landry demanded as the tactical boards painted huge numbers of contacts in the immediate vicinity as the ships sensor systems came back online, detecting a _huge_ volume of contacts around them, one almost half the size of a Wraith Hiveship and damn near on top of them. "Who in the hell _are_ _they?"

"They're not Ori, Goa'uld or Wraith designs" Cooper said as the ships computers checked the new sensor returns and categorically denied the

possibilities of one of their three main enemies being involved. "Nothing in the system even comes close to these designs in fact".

"How can there be a full scale war going on _less than_ _ten light years from Earth_ between cultures we don't know about?" Mitchell demanded, partially of the crew, but mostly of the universe.

"We can worry about that later" Landry replied shortly. "This isn't our fight and I don't want to get caught up in it. Carter; how soon can we get back into hyperspace?"

"It's no good" the Colonel replied a few seconds later, in a tone that didn't promise good news. "The Hyperdrive has shut itself down completely and I'm still trying to figure out what happened to the-"

"Colonel, we just jumped into the middle of a war between races we've never seen before" Lander cut her off with considerable patience and coolness, in his humble opinion. " 'Un-Shutting it down' would be appreciated sooner rather than later before someone around here decides to take a shot at us".

"I'm heading to the engine room" she replied with that slightly distant tone that people always had when on the move. "I'll know more after I can get a look at the system directly".

"Let me know as soon as possible Colonel" Landry snapped off the link, shooting a look at Mitchell that spoke volumes for how deep the water was starting to get today, before shooting a sour look at Marks's back. "At least tell me the shields are still up?"

"Yes Sir" Marks confirmed, his eyes not leaving his board as he got a grip on the new situation. "Nearest contact is Capital, Mothership size classification. Three point five klicks on the X axis, distance ten Kilometers dead aft-"

"Sir I'm detecting high frequency radar, microwave and laser based systems now tracking us, from the contact" Cooper broke in as her threat board started chirping a sound that Hank Landry knew was a 'Bad' sound. "Thermagraphics are picking up huge energy buildups along its upper hull".

"Bring us around and put it onscreen" Landry ordered as Daniel, Teal'c and Mitchell moved up next to Valla, who was still pressed up against the side of the viewport straining to study the battle. The main screen on the left side of the bridge obediently flickered over to a hull mounted camera shot of the enemy ship and Landry studied the smooth, curved purple/silver hull with interest. There was an undeniable 'elegance' to the design that reminded him of Ori or Asgard ships, despite the clearly different design principals. The sophistication of a culture advanced enough to allow form and function to blend much more smoothly than the strictly functional 'bricks' Earth threw into space as quickly as they could be built...

Even the smaller lumpy fairings and structures on the hull sited for maximum overlap of coverage that could only be weapons mounts gleamed with a polished light that accentuated the effect...except for the one that was starting to glow brighter and brighter-

"Energy spike! They're firing!" Cooper exclaimed as the warning chimes switched to a rapid high pitched beeping.

"Oh hell..." Mitchell muttered as he stepped up level with Valla, the gigantic ship coming into view to the naked eye as a lance of white energy discharged straight at the _Odyssey_, meeting the concave wall of the ships defensive shields just outside the bow.

The force of the blow was enough to send Mitchell stumbling back with Daniel Jackson into the bridge, though by some miracle neither of them lost their dignity by falling over. Teal'c, somewhat annoyingly to Mitchell, was as unfazed by the impact as if his feet were welded to the deck and Valla had, with her usual habit of thinking three steps ahead of everyone else, quietly shifted to the side of the window and taken a firm hold of the secondary weapons console there, offering a slightly superior smirk at the two members of SG1 trying to hold their dignity as they waved their arms wildly to balance themselves.

"Designate the ship as hostile" Landry ordered over the thunder of the assault, wincing as sparks from an overloading console arced to the floor just to his right, barely missing him and sending the smell of scorched electronics across the bridge as the life support systems worked to remove the smoke, the acidic smell souring his mood as he decided he was sick of people shooting at him today, and it was time to shoot _back_. "Target four Mark Eights".

"Warheads armed" Cooper replied a heat beat later as her hands flew across her console, designating the target and releasing the nuclear safety locks. "Target is locked".

"Fire!"

Four missiles exploded from the ships forward VLS pack that the bridge looked over, the engines igniting moments later as the missiles slewed around in a very Newtonian fashion to point in the direction of the enemy ship. The Mark Eight Warhead was the mainstay of Earths fleet, a refined version of the first generation 'Goa'uld Busters' Area-51 had developed early in the Stargate program. Essentially a Naquadah enhanced Nuclear device capable of tearing a rather expensive and extensive hole in the side of a Wraith Hiveship, it was mounted on the latest missile design out of Area-51, an evolution of older missiles developed from hard lessons against the Wraith. Equipped with improved maneuvering thrusters, advanced 3D evasive routines and a final high-yield three second burn engine designed to get it past either point defenses or kamikaze Wraith darts, the missile was Boeings pride and joy, Earths great hope of evening the fight up against the giant ships of death that rolled across the Pegasus Galaxy with near impunity, harvesting humans like grains of wheat as they went.

And in their first test, the missiles had barely ignited their main engines when a rapid series of blue pulses lanced out from the side of the alien ship and exploded them with an astonishingly casual display of accuracy, mocking the best efforts of the US Military-Industrial complex, before a second series of pulses lanced out from another blister and hammered on the ships shields furiously, as if the enemy was enraged that they had dared try to defend themselves.

"All missiles intercepted before reaching the target!" Cooper declared somewhat unnecessarily as the quartet of explosions faded barely a kilometer from the _Odyssey's_ bow, her eyes focused on her board and not the window as the shields rallied under the enemy assault, dissipating the energy in a blue shimmering around the _Odyssey's_ bow. "The enemy ship is reorienting; it's coming around to face us directly".

"That can't be good" Valla pointed out. "Has anyone considered running yet? Or cloaking? Just saying, because as I always say, she who lives and runs away-"

"There is no reason to believe this ship can outrun them" Teal'c broke in with his typically dour voice. "To shift the shields to a cloak at this range would leave us at a disadvantage, ensuring we would take heavy damage before disengaging. Our only remaining option would appear to be to engage in battle".

"Well no offense chuckles, but our missiles didn't exactly impress these guys" Valla pointed out with a wave at the alien ship as it turned to face them fully, as if they now had its complete and undivided attention, a bright star moving behind it for a few seconds before the shifting bulk of the alien ship hid it. "I don't think another salvo is going to do more then make them laugh at us!"

"So let's break out the big guns already!" Mitchell suggested in response, turning to Landry with a questioning look on his face. "Mark Nines?"

Landry felt his lip twitch at the reminder. In addition to the Mark Eight warheads that were the standard armament on _Daedalus_ class ships, the armory on _Odyssey_ also held a quartet of the new 'Tactical' Mark IX 'Gatebuster' warheads being developed for the Horizon weapons platform; a Fractional Orbital Bombardment System designed to end all civilization on a world as ruthlessly as a Goa'uld System Lord in a bad mood. The idea that they needed a weapon that utterly redefined what 'Weapon of Mass Destruction' meant still gave Landry chills, but he conceded that given the possibility of coming up against an Ori Mothership that had shrugged off lesser weapons with few problems, he would much rather have the option of deploying these weapons, then not having the weapons at all.

But of course, thanks to the work of the Asgard over their homeworld over the last few days, Landry now had a third option that didn't make him feel cold inside from just thinking about them.

"Carter" he called into the Communications link to the final member of SG1, "our missiles weren't effective against these peoples point defense, whoever the hell they are. What about the new Asgard energy weapons?"

"They haven't been tested Sir" Carter replied absently as she ran into the ships engine room at speed, hurrying over to the primary console where the ships officers were trying to bring the ships Hyperdrive back online, the group making way for her as soon as they saw her. It only took her a few moments to realize that it wasn't exactly shut down, but going through an automated hard shutdown and restart process, probably a result of whatever had caused that strange subspace shift earlier, and she was loath to override it

without knowing more about what had happened...

"No time like the present" Landry muttered under his breath at the enemy ship out the window, another salvo of the blue energy pulses reaching out from it and jolting them, even as the larger turret of its primary weapon started once again to glow with brilliant white energy visible even from this distance. "Let's see what these new Asgard upgrades are made of. Bring sublight engines to military thrust and power the energy weapons!"

Odyssey's sublight engines ignited, the ship accelerating into sweeping curve towards the vastly larger Covenant ship, which in turn slowed and started to yaw, working to keep its weapons in the line of fire as the large turret on the top of the ship continued to overcharge itself to dangerous levels as the _Odyssey_ closed to point blank range, energy flowing now for the first time from the ships power grid into a dozen new emplacements that had been attached to the hull over the last few days...

**0626 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>UNSC _**Pillar of Autumn**_**, Epsilon Eridani
System**

Jacob Keyes had seen many things in his life that had left him speechless, for one reason or another. The first time he had seen the results of a Covenant 'Glassing' operation being one, as had been the time he had come home and found a six year old Miranda on his doorstep waiting for him, sitting on a bag of all her worldly possessions and brightly telling him that she had left her Mother to come and live with _him_, somehow making it all the way from Reach to Earth's Moon without anyone letting him know she was coming, a fact he put down to her mother's 'unique' sense of humor

But the events out the window kept him silent in a stupefied way far beyond even that moment in his life, as he saw something absolutely impossible happen.

He had felt his rage spike as a flare of white light overload the visual feed before he could give the order to open fire; a beam of energy lancing at and consuming the apparently helpless human ship in a cocoon of white light. None the less he checked his emotion before he could vent it, ordering Hikowa to hold her fire as his military mind ruthlessly took advantage of the distraction provided to close the distance where his first strike would be overwhelming rather than merely distracting, mentally dedicating this kill to the memory of some human ship no-one would probably ever know about or care about in this God forsaken war, preparing to give the order to avenge its death as the visual cleared from the lightshow of destructionâ€|

â€|only to feel his jaw drop open as he stared at the display, stunned. Sitting there and all but mocking the efforts of the vastly larger Covenant warship to kill it by its continued presence, was the unknown human ship, a faint shimmering visible around it that faded to nothing moments later, as the last of the energy projector fire was harmlessly dissipated away.

This ship had _shields_.

It could only be a human ship; Cortana without asking had brought up

scans of the ship's hull on his display that clearly showed English lettering and numbering, and frankly the design was a dead giveaway, Keyes thinking it shared more than a few similarities to the newer Stalwart and Paris class Frigates, like his daughters In Amber Clad. And even as he watched, another exchange of fire took place, laser blasts shredding a missile salvo fired at the Covenant ship before a second volley of laser fire bashed against the other ship, this time not overloading the screen and showing clearly the shimmering energy field that glowed blue under the attack, dissipating the energy into a concave wall around the bow of the ship, again to Keyes astonished confusion.

Even a Covenant ship would never be able to just shrug off an Energy Projector blast followed up by laser fire like that!

"Cortana-"

"There are no UNSC records of this ship design" Cortana anticipated the question as she devoted almost all of her processing power to analysis and data retrieval work, burning CPU cycles as she impatiently pulled in every refresh of the sensor data and tore it open six ways to look for any new clue, finding no records matching this ship in her rather comprehensive database.

It only took moments for her to judge who might have records on this ship but had not shared it, and after a brief debate over the legality of her actions, she decided the current situation more than justified extreme measures, blowing back via the Autumns FLEETCOM datalinks to the Reach Millnet and jumping into the ONI database in their main HQ with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop. Not even bothering to hide her presence, she danced around their firewalls and kill-code almost absently, co-opting a half dozen of the local 'Dumb' AI's to do the heavy search work for her as she 'punted' Beowulf, the ONI 'Smart' AI who looked after the database into a secure partition to let her work without distractions. Her re-tasked AI's, convinced she was a perfectly legitimate ONI AI - which was actually quite true - who had security clearance for this database - which was utterly false- forwarded her the results of her query in record time, and she kicked the data to a secure buffer on the Autumn before logging off, leaving an apologetic data point in her wake for Beowulf, who she knew would never have let her in if she had asked; the other AI for some reason thought of her as 'trouble'â€¦

And yet, for all her effort, she still came up negative. Although one of her cross linked mission profile threads flagged an alert; the Circumference that had generated the Alpha Priority Cole Protocol violation was in fact a camouflaged ONI Prowler.

Typical. So many ONI sub cells never bothered to clean up their messes these days...

Noting then dismissing her simulated spikes of annoyance and frustration at the dead end, she reset her processing threads and tried to approach the problem from a different perspective. Doctor Halsey as part of project MJOLNIR had worked hand in hand with the team who developed the shield generators built into the new Mark V suit, helping them crack several key scientific problems in the process. Cortana had studied everything on and off the record about

the new technology, putting her in a better position than almost anyone to know just how far along the UNSC's limited shield technology was, including the daunting engineering difficulties in scaling the systems Earth was facing. The Mark V power suits were the first field worthy practical unit that had been deployed, followed closely by the prototype _Saber_ space superiority fighters undergoing test flights on Reach—and to get _their_ shields working had taken an experimental reactor dangerous enough that detachable booster rockets had been incorporated into ground launch facilities to throw the ship high in the air before bringing the reactor on line, just in case a five kiloton 'problem' occurred when the pilot flipped the 'on' switch

And yet...this unknown human ship had perfectly valid, functional and effective shield technology on a scale far beyond that?

Alternative speculation calculated a remote - but definitely non-zero - chance that this was simply stolen Covenant starship technology in use by some 'black' ONI Sub cell that wasn't in the database she had just raided, perhaps an advanced deep recon prowler that had lost its Active Camouflage systems in the middle of the battle. But against that scenario, the idea that this kind of technology would be deployed in the field in secret as opposed to being sent to Earth where every R&D asset that Earth could throw at it _would_ be thrown at it were so low she didn't even bother to try and calculate the odds beyond ten decimal places, instead focusing her attention on fresh data as it came in, 'feeling' as only a Smart-AI could that she wasn't on the right track yet...but lost as to where the answer was—|

"I'm detecting EM spikes from the unknown, they may be bringing additional systems online" she continued speaking to Keyes, having only taken a second to consider the situation in depth, devoting her attention back to other matters as the _Autumn_ continued to close, almost coming within optimal archer missile range where Covenant point defense would have a hell of a time trying to knock down more than a small percentage of any salvo thrown. "Thermal bloom...they're moving!"

'Watching' through the sensor systems, Cortana tracked the other ship as they started moving in response to the Covenant ship reorienting on them, the smaller human ship curving inwards towards the already closing Covenant ship.

Poor tactics in her opinion, if they were aware of the _Autumn's_ presence; their best bet would have been to get clear and let the _Autumn_ take their shot, hope the Covenant ship decided to just ignore them as it turned to deal with the bigger threat, or at the least give them the opening to open fire again.

But instead, she saw history being made.

A pair of pale blue beams of energy that spiked readings across the EM spectrum she couldn't begin to comprehend lanced out from the bow of the unidentified ship, crashing into the shield boundary of the Covenant warship at precisely the same point amidships. As she predicted in the microseconds between firing and impact, the shield flared with a brilliant silver shimmering at the point of contact like all Covenant shields did when they tried to repel enemy weapons fire...but unlike every other time she had seen them activate, they

didn't even so much as slow the progress of the energy beams, which simply continued unimpeded through the formidable defenses like a sword cleaving through cobwebs.

Overriding and taking control of every sensor she could train on the event, Cortana focused and 'watched' through several dozen different eyes as the beams impacted the 'Supercruisers' hull at a shallow angle amidships and punched through, an enormous explosion vomiting out of the dorsal surface a heartbeat later as the beams cut off, Cortana realizing that the weapons strike had just passed through not just the ships shields, but through its entire hull without even slowing down.

In one salvo!

Killing her emotional sub-processes as they started to saturate her with irrelevant data of astonishment and disbelief, she watched as a series of secondary explosions started to tear down the spine of the ship from the initial detonation. A somewhat predictable chain reaction inevitably followed as power conduits and weapons capacitors detonated violently, the backbone of the ship twisting as the ships engines continued to thrust forward against the fatally weakened hull until, inevitably, a massive explosion tore the ship apart as its fusion reactors and overcharged weapons systems released their energy against the doomed ship.

The detonation tore the Supercruiser to pieces. Shrapnel the size of office blocks was flung into the system as if the galaxies largest fragmentation bomb had just been detonated, no small amount of it heading towards the Autumn. Ensign Loyal at the helm cursed and yanked his controls in the nick of time, rolling the ship's bow away and around to present a top 'edge on' profile to the explosion, a cacophony of crashing sounding as wreckage ricochet of the hull for a few seconds until the wave of debris and fire passed them, leaving them alone...with no sign of the unknown ship.

"Damage report" Keyes barked as his ship finished shaking in protest under him.

"No breaches, minimal outer hull damage, mostly cosmetic" Hall replied quickly as she worked her console.

"Very well" Keyes replied, stepping around his screens to the secondary tactical station at the port side of the expansive bridge as the explosion cleared leaving nothing but very small fragments of what had been one of the most powerful Covenant ships in-system.

"Ensign Lovell, bring us about and take us back to the fleet. Dominique, update the Flagship and get the two Spartan teams on the line, I want situation reports ASAP. Hikowa, deploy a standard grid of Clarions around Csodaszarvas as we break; I want to know what the Covenant fleet is up to and I want to know yesterday".

A chorus of acknowledgements came back as the Autumn powered down the reactor somewhat and started to reverse her course back to Reach, a half dozen puffs of exhaust shooting out from her starboard side as the Calrion spy drones launched, streaking away for the moon the Covenant were hiding behind.

Cortana noted the launch of the drones peripherally, her attention focused on other issues. She had replayed the sensor logs of the

explosion, methodically tagging and tracking the debris from the Covenant ship, extrapolating every variable to try and locate debris from the unknown human shipâ€|yet found nothing but debris that was clearly from the Covenant ship.

Frowning, she burned her processing power in furious concentration at the vaporized and micro-particulate remains of the Covenant ship at the leading edge of the near spherical explosion, looking for 'shadows' and 'grooves' in the cloud of fast and light debris, chasing an assumption-

There!

To her astonishment, she spotted _something_ moving not quite across the explosions path, the particulate debris being pushed around by something that didn't show up on any of her active or passive sensors as she focused everything she could on the tenuous track. She couldn't _see_ it, but _something_ was there in the dust and echoes that no radar, laser or microwave emissions got the slightest reflection, distortion or lensing effects onâ€|which was _impossible_.

Even the best ONI prowler with the best active camouflage at this range wouldn't stand a chance of hiding itself from the _Autumns_ newly upgraded and bleeding edge sensor systems, especially with _her_ working them. And even as she 'watched', the tenuous track vanished as the contact moved out of the explosions cloud and into 'open' spaceâ€|

Who in the hell _were_ they?

She brought up the markings on the ship's hull in deep thought. Already she had run the name and design of the ship against all her UNSC and 'borrowed' ONI databases without any close matches. There were several ships in the human fleet with the word '_Odyssey_' in their names -two military freighters of the _Orion_ class and one fleet tender to be exact- but none with the 'USAF' acronym or that strange triangular symbol with a circle on top. The hull number of '03' was also no help, if still interesting. The 'USAF' marking howeverâ€|

The odds of this ship being from an organization rolled into the United Nations Aerospace -then Space- Command hundreds of years before humanity took a step into deep space was insane at first glance. But a quick jump back to one of the few COMSATS still operational in Reach orbit and from there into the FLEETCOM database matched the black and gray star centered between three horizontal bars on either side as the classic signature of United States Air Force craftâ€|

If Cortana had been capable of headaches, she strongly suspected she would have gotten one right about now as she cleared her active processes and opened up several historical databases.

**0628 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>USS _**Odyssey**_**, Epsilon Eridani System**

"We're clear" Cooper announced as the _Odyssey_ moved out of the debris shell and onto a randomized course away from the battle. "That other ship was sweeping our location with broadband EM sensors for a

few seconds, but it looks like we lost them as soon as we moved into open space and away from the debris of that ship. They're turning around and heading back to the planet".

"Well let's hope they can't see us, because we're running without shields now" Landry pointed out as Odyssey powered away from the battle under cloak, glancing to the side as a slightly out of breath Samantha Carter jogged onto the bridge. "Good timing; Colonel, what's going on with my Hyperdrive?"

"It's coming back online, it should be up in a couple of minutes, assuming the final checks don't show anything" she replied as she moved to join the rest of SG1, a Tablet PC in her hands. "But I think we have a bigger problem...I think I've figured out why we're not getting any answer from Earth, and why we have no record of these cultures, let alone never heard of a planet as advanced as this one on Earth's doorstep".

The background noise on the bridge subdued slightly at that statement. Hank Landry felt a new chill pass across him at the statement, possibilities of an all out Ori attack on Earth passing across his mind as the reason for why they were not responding before he forced himself to calm down, noting that while the Colonel looked serious, she didn't look like she had just found out Earth had been turned into a second Asteroid Field around Sol.

"Alright Colonel, explain it to me, carefully please"

The Colonel nodded, then tapped her tablet, linking it to the main bridge screen and switching the sensor display showing the orbital tracks around the local planet and tracks on the far side of the closest moon in blue and purple respectively, to sensor logs and readouts, with a bewildering array of energy signatures and Asgard text streaming through data windows.

"I've been going over the system logs from the Hyperdrive" she said, nodding at the screen. "The new Asgard systems are incredibly advanced, even more so than the previous Asgard Hyperdrives they had given us for our ships. When the Asgard Homeworld exploded, it caused a release of highly exotic radiation that disrupted subspace in ways that I still don't understand, but the long and short of it is that it clearly effected the Hyperspace window generated by the Hyperdrive both as we jumped and when we were inside Subspace. I asked the Asgard core-"

"You...asked the Asgard Core?" Mitchell broke in with a look that suggested he was wondering if she had been working too hard...

"The Asgard Core came with a built in AI that Thor spent quite a few months working on" Carter explained with a patient look at the other Colonel. "It's extremely advanced; I just had to run it by-"

"It's all fascinating I'm sure" Landry broke back in somewhat impatiently before she got too deep into sprucing the clearly impressive technology, "but can you bottom line it for me Colonel?"

Taking the hint, Carter turned to face him and took a deep breath.

"We're not in our own universe anymore. We've crossed over into an alternate reality, much the same as those we've interacted with several times over the SGC's history. Even worse, from the variations in the Star field and general Galactic drift, I calculate that we've moved forward, in this timeline relative to our own, roughly four hundred and fifty to five hundred years".

The reaction across the bridge was as rapid as it was varied.

Relief that Earth hadn't suffered a disaster.

Uncertainty over what it meant for them now.

Anger that it had happened.

But mostly just stunned surprise at the revelation. Of all the answers they may have expected the Colonel to give...that had not been one of them.

"Well that would explain why Earth isn't responding" Valla predictably broke the silence, stepping away from the window to rejoin the rest of the group. "Either they're ignoring us until they figure out what is going on, or more likely, they don't exist, and don't have the ability to receive subspace signals".

"Be that as it may, the more pressing question of course is going to be is there any way home?" Landry asked the only question that was on his mind, and probably the minds of everyone on the bridge.

The look on the Colonels face however, did not immediately bring hope to everyone on the bridge.

"I don't know" she said with brutal honesty. "We've seen these kinds of events before, I'm sure everyone remembers the...other SG1 that came through the Stargate last year".

"Along with a couple of dozen others" Landry replied dryly, to hide his unease at the memory. "As I recall, they did something to a black hole to open up a bridge between our universes?"

"Yes Sir" Carter nodded. "They manipulated a wormhole running through a Singularity with an explosion or energy weapon of some kind, punching through subspace and connecting their wormhole, and many others from other realities that passed close to the same black hole, through to our Earths Gate. We reversed the process and inverted the crossover point, letting us send everyone back afterwards...but that's not going to help us this time. In that situation we had a predictable doorway between the universes we were able to manipulate".

"What about the work McKay and his Sister did on Atlantis?" Mitchell asked with a slight tilt of his head. "That was all developed from first principals wasn't it?"

Carter nodded, looking slightly more enthusiastic at that possibility.

"It was, a lot of the information for that project came from the Black Hole incident, although the key piece came from Rodney McKays Sister".

"And boy did that piss him off" Mitchell added in a sotto voice.

Carter grinned in memory of the moment despite the seriousness of the situation, getting herself back under control quickly enough.

"Now, we were able to develop what was essentially a duplication of a Quantum Mirror, but one that only required the Gateway on our side instead of two mirrors together, which used subspace displacement principals similar to the effect between the Stargates we saw earlier in the year. Given time, I might be able to duplicate the technology; we have the power and with the help of the Asgard Core and its synthesizer technology, I can probably build the necessary components...but that's the easy bit".

Landry's eyebrow raised fractionally at that.

"Do I dare ask then what the hard bit would be?"

"Connecting to the right reality" Daniel joined the conversation, his eyes loosing focus slightly as he thought back to his experience with the Quantum mirror, everyone turning to face him. "With the Quantum Mirror" he explained, "the hard bit was trying to lock on to the same reality when the mirrors disconnected. I mean it had some kind of ability to narrow it down from infinite universes to a narrow band we could select from, but even so..."

"Long and short of it" Carter continued with a somewhat less happy look, "is that even if we can build a bridge between universes, pointing it back at our reality is going to be incredibly hard, looking for a needle in a haystack of infinite size if you will".

"Wait, hang on" Mitchell snapped his fingers looking somewhat triumphant as another memory occurred to him. "You're forgetting the time recently, when you got sent to that Alternate Reality while working with Merlins phase shifting technology".

"Actually" Sam corrected him, "that was where I started my thinking on the way up to the bridge. But the ability to find our reality mostly came down to the notes and data my duplicate had stored in her files, as well as the intact records from Merlins device when we shifted across the dimensions...and I don't have all that information on hand, the more complex data is back at the SGC".

"But you can duplicate it here, right?" Valla demanded, a frown on her face as she stepped closer. "We're not going to be stuck here forever are we?"

Carter just exhaled slowly. "I think, given time...I can probably get us home...but I just can't give an honest idea of how long it might take. I'm not even trying to speculate on the temporal displacement yet, if it's a sign we traveled in time, or that this Quantum Reality is offset from our own. Unless I can find help from someone with more data on this, I'll have to develop a lot of the practical knowledge again from square one" Carter summarized, leaving unsaid but clear none the less from her tone, what an incredible amount of work that would be. "I never thought I would say this...but I really wish Rodney was here right now, he's done a lot of work in this field, but

from the opposite side I of where I've been working".

"So summing it up, we're stuck here for an unknown amount of time, with limited resources and in the middle of a war zone...that about sum it up?" Valla sighed loudly, although her eyes suggested strongly that her mind was already at work on the best way to turn the situation to her advantage.

Not that Landry especially minded right now. If they were stuck here, someone as street wise as Vala Mal Doran could turn out to be as valuable to them as the Asgard Plasma Beam Weapons to this ship...

"Colonel, I take it from your statements that you think we're going to need help from the locals, sooner rather than later?" Landry replied to Carter, moving past the 'getting back' issue to more practical concerns.

"It's an option" she conceded. "They are clearly technologically advanced, if possibly not to our level with the Asgard upgrades. At the least, they could provide us with material and resource support, probably a secure base of operations to work from. It's also not impossible that they may know what caused our transition to this universe - for all we know they may even be behind it somehow".

"Or it could be the other aliens in this system" Daniel pointed out.

"And we just blew up one of their big ships" Mitchell pointed out. "They may not like that too much if they were behind this and we need to ask for their help".

"Either way, it's not like we don't hold most of the cards at the table" Valla continued her musing out loud with a smile on her face. "This ship, thanks to the Asgard, is carrying an incredible amount of scientific knowledge and advanced that would let us name our price for any assistance we want, on either side of the war. Materials, supplies, precious metals...planets-

"The Asgard gave everything to us because they trusted us" Daniel cut in quickly with a rather pointed look at Valla before he turned back to everyone else to make his point. "Not to sell off their technology to the highest bidder! We can't just treat their legacy so flippantly, like a chip at a poker game!"

"I'd tend to agree" Landry said quickly before an argument could really start up between the two, trying to keep focused on the immediate problems of their catastrophic situation. "I'm not inclined to promise anything to anyone until we get a better handle on the real picture here. All we know so far about the locals is that there is a war going on between a group who are probably from Earth, and an unknown alien race, and we may have just had war declared by one side against us".

"So...we need to talk to some locals" Mitchell extrapolated, with a glance at Landry, who nodded slowly in agreement. "Someone who knows what is going on and can help us get some information so we can actually make a decision". He paused for a second, glancing at the main screen as new alerts sounded, Carter switching the display back quickly on her tablet to a readout, showing the alien fleet in orbit

behind the moon increasing in size, new waves of contact icons were being drawn on the screen as they come out of FTL and rapidly increased the size of the force there, even as other icons already present vanished, only to reappear in orbit of the planet a heartbeat later and at once start engaging the human ships and stations there. "But somehow I don't think anyone local is going to have the time to sit around and chat with us right now." he finished somewhat grimly. "We may have to wait around for the end of this, or even head off to Earth and see if we can find some answers there..."

Something in Sam's face suddenly twitched at Cameron's words, a slight smile coming over her face again as she turned to look at Landry.

"Sirâ€¦I might just have an idea that can give us as much time as we need".

**0632 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>Reach Station Gamma Space, Anchor 1 Shipyard Complex, Epsilon
Eridani System

Spartan "James-005" didn't panic, despite the fact that he was spinning helplessly into space thanks to a misfiring thruster pack. Nor at the fact that his communications were down, that there was a Covenant destroyer only a kilometer away that had materialized as they had made their final approach to the station and that it had spawned a large number of enemy fighter craft, Dropships and even Zero-G Elites, all descending towards the station - and him.

'Panic' just wasn't in the possible responses of a Spartan II.

A normal human would have long since passed out from either the G forces or slow air leak from his armor as the half ton suit rocketed in a flat spin from the asymmetric thrust, but nothing about James or any of his Brothers or Sisters could possibly be said to be 'ordinary'; and so he continued to fight. He fought calmly, with a detached, steady and intellectual effort, but he held nothing back either, working to get his spin under control, the first step to arresting his velocity and returning to the station, to Blue Team.

Death held little fear for him, not after decades of war.

But failing this critical missionâ€¦

That, that he would fight against until his last breathâ€¦and he was enough of a realist to realize it was probably going to come sooner rather than later, a chunk of melted debris from some UNSC ship or station coming into view and pinwheeling right for him as he realized that this was it.

But today, fate played a different hand and with a flash of white light, the tumbling star field vanished, replaced with a bright room and a hard metal floor that he crashed face first into. Gravity now holding him down as his shields flickered and died, his innate sense of balance telling him the heavy misfiring thruster pack was no longer on his back as he realized somehow, he was on a ship.

Reflexes beaten into him through countless years of training took

over as his mind struggled to catch up with the abrupt change, rolling around and to his feet in a blur as diagnostic data scrolled down the corner of his visor declaring his shield grid non-functional and his armor compromised-

"Woah, easy!"

The Spartan didn't quite freeze at the call from the startled human voice as a small group of people came into view, but he did relax fractionally and stop himself from pulling his MA5B into a firing position as he confirmed he was not on a Covenant ship. Five men, two armed with something that looked like slightly customized variants of standard UNSC BR55 Battle Rifle, all in combat fatigues, their weapons held ready at port arms, but not pointed at anyone...yet. The lead man in the formation had shortly cropped air, and while no transponder data came up from a CNI transponder on his HUD, his lighting fast thought patterns locked in on the silver cluster on the lead mans lapel and the 'Lt Col' markings on his uniform-

"Sir!" he barked, standing to attention in a blur in the presence of a senior officer and snapping a perfect salute which appeared to surprise the man slightly, but he retuned crisply none the less.

"At Ease" the man ordered, the men "with the exception of a large, dark skinned man without any rank insignia at all but a very odd golden tattoo of some kind on his head- all craned their necks to stare at him, looks of awe and amazement crossing their faces that James had long become used to when in the presence of other UNSC personnel, few of whom ever saw a Spartan 'in the flesh', so to speak.

"Name? Rank?" The other asked quickly, again confusing James slightly and making him wonder if there was something interfering with CNI transponder implants in the area, but not so much that he wasn't quick on the ball to answer.

"Sir! Senior Chief Petty Officer Spartan-005, Sir!"

"Stand easy Chief" the officer said, appearing to be at something of a loss of what to say, before another man, with glasses and again no insignia at all, stepped forward.

"Spartan...we just pulled you out of that battle; your thruster pack was sending you spinning into the middle of the crossfire between the ships".

"Thank you Sir" James replied in a level voice, not entirely sure _what_ to make of this group...but the mention of the battle snapped his attention back to the situation outside and he realized from a quick glance at his mission clock, that at least a minute had passed, and he needed to get back to action. "Request permission to gear up and return to mission"

"Denied" the first man said, cocking his head slightly. "Chief there areâ€¦complications".

"Sir?" James asked, letting a hint of impatience come into his tone, mostly to cover the sudden feel of dread at the idea of 'complications', now starting to wonder how he had moved from spinning into a piece of space debris to standing inside this ship.

The logical answer, that a recovery ship had picked him up and brought him here didn't make sense when he thought about his suits clock which insisted almost no time had passed...

Unless of course it had been damaged along with other systems on his suit.

But...could it be wrong?

Could the battle already be over?

And worse, could the unthinkable have happened while he was spinning off into space and blacking out? Could this ship even now be outbound from Reach, the planet dying behind them as the Covenant glassed it, Red and Blue Teams dead-

Training kicked in at that point however, snapping his mind away from such useless questions and speculation, instead nodding at the order -but politely phrased as a request- from Colonel Mitchell to follow him to the conference room for a quick debriefing, snapping his rifle to the magnetic clips on his back and following the other out of the room through what he had thought was the airlock he had originally entered this ship through. As they walked along...he couldn't help but notice that no-one on the ship was wearing UNSC uniforms, or registering a CNI transponder.

Combined, the two facts lead to only one quick conclusion. This had to be a 'black' ONI ship.

That conclusion raised his alert level somewhat. Although he appeared to be walking along placidly after the Colonel, his combat training moved back to the forefront now, one eye kept on his motion sensor for unexpected contacts, his alertness back at the hair trigger level that let a Spartan go from perfect calm to raging avatar of the God of War in less time than most normal people took to blink.

He wouldn't have normally reacted this way to ONI personnel over the years of his service. He and the other Spartan IIs had generally been indifferent to ONI - despite technically being an ONI resource assigned to NAVSPECWEP - as they each served Earth and her Colonies in their own way against the Covenant and other threats. Their methods differed, but he could appreciate that different targets needed different methods.

Then they had found out about the Spartan III Program, two months ago.

Shaking off his thoughts, he kept his mouth shut and his guard up as they turned off the corridor and through a pair of blast doors to what appeared to be a briefing room with a man and two women sitting at the table. He didn't recognize the uniform, although the pair of silver stars on his shoulders-

James was about a millisecond away from snapping to attention again and saluting the Flag Officer, when he chanced to look out the window.

Despite having a reaction time in the single digit milliseconds, it took James several long seconds to realize what he was staring

at.

The enormous battle outside that wasn't moving.

With a disbelieving feeling in his mind, he slowly walked towards the window, actually ignoring the officers as he blinked rapidly, willing the impossible scene outside the bulkhead to change.

It didn't.

There was a UNSC Type III Orbital Refinery, a pair of blue laser lines linking it to the distant dot of a Covenant Frigate, a silent unmoving explosion of debris spewing out from the impact point. Closer, a pair of Longsword Fighters were frozen in the middle of a Hammer-break turn onto a flight of Covenant fighters, the glare of a missile launch clear from under its wing, but the missile unmoving despite all evidence of its blazing engine he could see.

Taking in the wider view, he could see plasma torpedoes and flaming stations, missiles and MAC rounds all frozen in place, suddenly feeling a return of the crushing weight of the G forces that had almost knocked him out in the thruster pack as he stared at the impossible sceneâ€|

"Sirâ€|is this a recordingâ€|or a display of some kind?" he asked the only possibility that came to his mind. If so, it was by far the _highest_ resolution screen he had everseen in his life, his enhanced eyesight normally able to pick out the slight hints of even the best holographic projection, but _this_â€|

"I'm afraid not Son" the flag officer said with a sympathetic look on his face. "Crazy as it sounds, time has been stopped outside this ship. Or more accurately, time on and around_ this_ ship has been sped up...considerably. So relative to the outside world, we're moving much faster and they are effectively not moving".

"But weâ€|Sir, how is that possible?" James asked in a somewhat bewildered voice, suddenly wishing that John or even Doctor Halsey was here as he tried to wrap his mind around the concept. He was hardly 'dumb', all the Spartan II's had IQ's that rated above the genius level and the best educations the UNSC could provide. But _nothing_ _in_ his life had prepared him for this bizarre idea.

"The hell if I know Chief, I didn't invent the crazy technology" the senior officer grunted in a tone that suggested he wasn't very comfortable with the situation either, a fact that immediately helped James feel somewhat more comfortable, taking a final glance at the impossible stage outside the ship before slowly moving towards the offered seat and standing at parade rest, politely ignoring the offered chair he knew could not _possibly_ take the weight of his armor.

"With all due respect Sir" he finally put in as he decided to get to the bottom of everything, "_what_ _is_ going on?"

"Well this might take some time Chief" the General sighed, before giving a wry look to the window. "But as we appear to _have_ plenty of itâ€|"

**0635 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /

>Reach Station Gamma, Anchor 1 Shipyard Complex, Epsilon Eridani System

Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 edged an optical probe around the corner with the patient ease of long field experience, working to get a visual on the part of the spacedock her and Linda-058 were preparing to breach. Had the Master Chief been anything but the utterly professional soldier the UNSC had trained him to be, he might well have been tempted to curse at the stupidity of this whole mission. The idea that someone could be so flippant with something as sacrosanct as the Cole Protocol was appalling to his disciplined and military mind, but even worse was the fact that he had been forced to divert to clean up the mess, leaving the bulk of his people to head down to Reach, without him in command as he should be.

But he ultimately was the professional soldier the UNSC had trained him to be, as were his Spartans. Long field experience had taught him that no battle plan ever survived contact with the enemy, so he would focus on his mission, adapting and improvising where needed to get the job done, even to the point of putting aside James MIA status, forcing himself to only consider the loss of a teammate in terms of the diminishing of his team's firepower and flexibility. There would be time to mourn for his loss later.

Because now, as ever, the mission came first.

The optical probe finally came into position and started scanning, sending its data via fiber optics to his suits computers which processed it, combining the raw video feed with a tactical overlay as they picked out and highlighted hostile targets, key points of interest and anything else worth noticing, sending the combined image to his visors HUD as he slowly panned the camera back and forth to make sure he got as clear a picture as possible of what was going on.

He almost wished he hadn't.

The bay itself was a standard utility bay design identical to, if somewhat larger than those used on UNSC Super-MAC stations. A split level design, the lower level was filled with small to medium sized births, with an upper level catwalk typically used to hold heavy loading equipment to unload cargo. Opposite the main station bulkhead the airlock John and Linda were in sat were the space doors, floor to ceiling hatches made mostly out of heavy transparent plate embedded into Titanium-A frame with yellow and black caution markings. A quick glance through them provided quite a view of the intense dogfights around the station itself, but John swung his vision to the far side of the bay instead. The six oversized docking slips in the bay were half empty, with a pair of somewhat battered looking Pelicans in the number 4 and 5 slots, and what looked for all the world like a civilian yacht in the final bay that grabbed his attention at once, as he focused in on the large white circle stenciled on the bow of the ship where its name should have been.

That had to be the Circumference he thought quietly to himself as he took a few moments to study his objective...and almost immediately spotted the telltale signs of an ONI 'special action ship' in the subtle layers of armor plating and retractable antenna ports spotted over the hull, as well as the distinct lack of any traceable markings.

Momentarily, he wondered about exactly what 'black' operation must have been abandoned in a hurry when the Covenant arrived for it to have been left here, unsecured, before he dismissed the thoughts as irrelevant and worked to take in the wider situation at a glance.

Two births short of the ONI sneak job on the 'lower' floor, John caught glimpses of a firefight in progress through the catwalk grating, the silent flashes of green and blue of plasma weapons counterpointed against the sharp yellow flashes of human firearms, his IFF system overlaying transponders from a short squad of Marines in armored vac-suits, probably summoned by the dock master AI to destroy the unsecure NAV database. He couldn't see who they were fighting against, but a few bays closer to him he spotted a number of Jackals and Grunts, all impatiently in reserve as other Covenant troops fought in the tight confines...and between them and the forces already engaged, the few Marines left wouldn't be able to hold out much longer.

Well, unless Blue Team acted.

Killing the visual feed and letting the probe snap back into his left gauntlet, he retrieved assault rifle and mentally mapped out his plan of attack as he moved into a half crouch. Linda would be better left back here, engaging the Covenant reserve force with her unique skills to eliminate them as a threat to him, while he moved over the upper level to the Circumference in the confusion. Once there, he could find or make a way in, eliminate the NAV database and then descend to help the Marines, if any were still alive.

And as uneasy as the idea of putting the lives of fellow soldiers second was to him, an Alpha-Priority redirect was just that; everyone was expendable in the completion of the mission before any other priority, even him.

So he steeled himself and slipped the safety off his weapon.

"Suppress those Jackals Blue-One. I'll make a break for the Circumference".

"There are a lot of them" Linda noted in an almost clinical voice as she cradled her enormous rifle with the careful precision of a master of her work, having already positioned herself in the best position to engage the enemy from the small airlock they were holed up in "This may take a few seconds".

From anyone else, such a comment might have been taken as a joke.

However, just as she was about to prove to the doomed Jackals she was not joking, the Chiefs motion tracker pulsed a yellow 'unknown' contact behind him at extreme range. On reflex, he turned and brought his rifle to bear in the direction as the contact faded and saw nothing.

Of course, the probability was that it actually was nothing. A piece of debris or false sensor reading that the computer had eliminated after a second 'look' at the data.

But...his gut said something else.

One of the most valuable lessons he had learned from Chief Mendez had been to always remember that his 'gut' was worth far more than any sensor system in the field, as while sensor technology could offer a significant tactical advantage, it was only ever as useful as the total field experience of some pimple faced lab technician who had programmed it...

"Hang on, Blue-One" he said to Linda without looking back, switching his helmet over to low light mode as he eased back and started retracing his steps. "Possible contact, I'm going to check our six".

A single blue acknowledgement light flashed briefly, signifying her understanding as he stepped away, Linda 'falling' lightly to the deck as he moved away, gliding silently forward into the docking bay to secure a better vantage point on her targets, the death sentence of the Jackals and Grunts not in any way commuted, simply...suspended.

For now.

The Master Chief in turn eased back down through the airlock to the far side, a small anteroom with a flight of stairs ascending in front of him, and large double doors to his left and right that led into the cargo bays situated behind the docking bays. Turning left through the open doors there, he entered the cargo bay where the contact had pulsed for a second, his weapon following his gaze as he swept for contacts in the huge room. Irrationally, he almost wished Cortana had still been loaded onto his suit before he had deployed on this mission, without Linda or James backing him up, he couldn't help but feel exposed and alone like this, but he pushed aside the feelings as he moved on his sweep, resolving to clear the bay quickly of any threat, before getting back on his mission.

It was a task easier said than done of course. The entire station had been depressurized by the station's AI before it had committed suicide to avoid capture by Covenant forces, and it had fired thrusters to kill the rings rotation and simulated gravity for good measure, meaning his process was slow and careful rather than the quick sweep he would have preferred. Almost all the lights were dead thanks to the loss of primary power, leaving only the chemically powered emergency lights in operation, casting a dull red glow that was fine for smaller spaces, but in this huge space, filled with all manner of shipping containers and crates, the minimal light only deepened shadows all but opaque even to his enhanced eyesight.

He was heartened by the thought that the dark, Zero-G vacuum would make things hard for the Covenant, but it was no picnic for him or his team either. Despite the intense Zero-G combat training all Spartans had gone through, as well as the extensive experience in everything from covert infiltrations of enemy ships in thruster packs to riding Zero-G Assault Booster Frames into ship to ship combat, he just didn't like it. Very few Spartans did really, the enhanced speed, protection and strength their armor and augmentations gave them was frankly more of a liability in this environment than an asset. Even as he now 'walked' with the magnetized soles of his armor holding his suit on the deck, he had to take far greater care with

his footing then he would on any planet; the mass of his power armor combined with the reduced grip meant it would be all too easy to go flying from a slight misstep...

...and a misstep would be all too easy to make in the dim blood red emergency lighting. All manner of things could hide in it or along the floor to disrupt his footing, so many shadows blurring detail away, like that shadow that had just detached itself from the wall and edged out in front of him, shimmering into visibility as its active camouflage buffers overheated in the vacuum, yet still all but invisible in dull, non-reflective grey armor.

It was an Elite Commando. ONI had long ago tagged the species with the name 'Sangheili', but he still continued to use their original designator, finding that in his mind it far better described both their threat and position in the Covenant hierarchy on a tactical level—and their threat.

The warrior leaders of the Covenant had been a rare sight in the early years of the war with humanity, the aliens content on the few times they bothered to send in ground troops to use legions of Grunts and Jackals, no matter how many it took. But over the last year, sightings of the Elites had increased dramatically to the point that ONI was actively speculating on reasons to the sudden doctrinal shift. Some analysts had posited that small scale Elite 'commando' units were becoming increasingly active in the Covenant ground forces because they were running low on 'rank and file' troops, and were resorting to using small bands of 'Elite' units as the tip of the spear. Others claimed that the Elites themselves had not held 'average' human troops as generally worthy their presence on the battlefield, but had formed dedicated 'seek and kill' Commando units to hunt down Spartans for various honor or glory reasons. Still others claimed there was evidence that the senior Covenant members often appeared to be tasked to go find things other than humans to kill on the ground, a theory that had apparently been given a significant boost following the events on Sigma Octanus IV.

The Master Chief didn't really care about the big picture, focusing on the immediate threat as he always did. His Zero-G training held as he plated his foot and swung his rifle up, the half visible alien starting to level a plasma rifle of its own-

-at which point an orange bolt of energy shot in from a cross corridor deeper in the station and smacked into the Elite, square in its head.

The Elites armor was shielded just like his and earlier in this engagement outside as they had swarmed the station it had taken him several bursts of gunfire to collapse its shields, even before trying to punch through its armor. But whatever this bolt of energy was, it wasn't even slowed down by the Covenant shield, which overloaded in a golden flash milliseconds before the surprised Elites head was scattered all over the room, the headless corpse pinwheeling backwards to bounce off the wall and start drifting towards the 'ceiling', and leaving a trail of purple spheres spraying out in its wake.

After that display of firepower, John's first reaction was, understandably in his mind, to swing his weapon across to cover the cross corridor from where the energy blast had come, taking two quick

steps back into the darkened cover of a heavy shipping crate where he would be able to hit whatever the hell had just done that should it be necessary, only to hesitate moments later as his motion tracker activated, this time with a green dot moving closer on his motion tracker, rather than a red dot, which could only mean a friendly with a recognized UNSC transponder.

"Blue Leader?"

Johns eyes widened slightly and his aim point lowered a fraction as he started to slowly move forward. _It couldn't be..._

It was. Spartan James-005 stepped through the doorway alive and well, an oversized heavy weapon of some kind covering the body of the Elite as it slowly rose above him to make sure it was down for the count before he let the weapon rest easy in Zero-G, turning towards his CO who had also snapped his MA5B down and left to bring the muzzle out of the firing line. The other Spartans armor looked like it had been through a year's worth of fighting and field repairs as opposed to being on its first combat mission, a number of grey 'patches' across the armor clearly showing where James must have been some quick field repairs, mostly around the Thruster Pack mounting points where the armor looked somewhat charred. How exactly James had managed to arrest his uncontrolled spin in the middle of hoards of Covenant, get back to the station, repair his armor and then come find him after apparently 'borrowing' one of their weapons...would probably be an interesting story, later.

But the mission clock was still running.

The other Spartan also clearly decided against wasting time with long explanations, simply reaching up with two fingers to 'draw' a line across his visor from left to right, the Spartan symbol for 'smile' and probably the most open emotion any of them would ever show in the field.

The Chief returned the gesture and with a slight inclination of his head signaled a fallback towards Linda as he triggered Blue-Teams channel, an update passing across the tactical net as James's suit re-linked to the squad COM Network

"Six clear, returning with Blue Two" he said, receiving a quick pair of yellow flashes from Linda to showed she understood what he had just said, but was lightly engaged/engaging the enemy at this time, causing John to hurry his steps as much as he dared in the Zero G as he retraced his steps back to her.

"We have at least a platoons worth of Elites coming in behind us" James spoke up for the first time since rejoining, all business as the pair moved in standard close combat sweep drills towards Lindas NAV marker in Bay-9, the other Spartan hefting his heavy weapon by a convenient carrying handle, but for now sweeping with his M6D sidearm that was better suited for quick close quarters movement, checking their six constantly as they moved back towards Linda. "I've laid a few surprises in their path, some directional mines and explosive charges to make them think twice, but given how many are back there, it won't slow them down for very long".

John flashed an acknowledgement light at the report, pondering at how the tactical situation was continuing to devolve and wondering what

_else _could go wrong on this mission. The time limit had now become critical; they had to blow through the enemy in front, complete their objectives and secure an exfiltration route _quickly_, or they would be caught between two forces and wiped out. Again, he found himself wishing he had brought Cortana along. Had she been present, he would have been tempted to simply blow through to the _Circumference_ and take her straight out of the dock. As exfiltration craft went, it was probably ideal after all, and he had no doubt the spirited artificial intelligence would have found it the AI equivalent of child's play to break through any ONI Cyberwar defenses to give him control.

It was somewhat strange, despite only having worked with her once that he found himself missing both her creativity in problem solving in addition to the wide array of additional abilities and options she brought to his team, wondering if she would have seen another option here that he was missing...

But she wasn't here, and he didn't have time to second guess himself, so they would have to do it the messy way.

Hurrying back through the Airlock as Blue-Two paused to cover their six, the Chief edged around the far door and moved out onto the raised first story catwalk over the docking bay in a crouch, working his way along the catwalk to a point near Linda, who he saw had drifted up to the ceiling and the pools of darkness behind a still functional floodlight, the Spartans 'loan wolf' methodically picking off her targets on the 'ground' level, barely visible even to his enhanced eyesight. As he glanced back down at the confused mess she had made of the reserve force, he spotted a flash of blue moving back from the fight near the _Circumference_ and opened his mouth to warn her.

He needn't have bothered; a match-grade hand loaded Sabot round blew through the lower ranking Elites head, but a fraction of a second too late as it stabbed its hand right at the area the concealed Spartan was hiding.

Cannon fodder they may be, but Jackals were not stupid. Almost at once, the Jackals snapped around and brought their shields online in a wall between them and Linda, falling back as a group to the narrow access point between bays 3 and 4 and the space doors, Grunts cowering behind the shield wall - except for one who foolishly -if bravely- tried to aim a fuel rod projectile launcher upwards through a gap in the shields, an explosion of blue blood rapidly putting paid to that attempt before it could even begin to pull the trigger.

John suppressed a curse as their cover was blown, recognizing the delaying tactic when he saw it. Trying to punch through would be long work, trying to go over them in slow Zero-G motion would be near suicide, and with an unknown number of Covenant still furiously engaging the grimly entrenched Marines in the bay the _Circumference_ was in...

"Incoming aft" James spoke up from ten meters back at the door, the same contacts showing up on the Chiefs own motion tracker via datalink from a stay-behind sensor James had clearly left back deeper in the cargo area, before he felt a muffled explosion through the deck and the first wave of the dots vanished rather abruptly.

"Only two more surprises left" the other warned, stepping back inside

the airlock and, with a grunt, pulling the heavy door shut, jamming it shut by the simple expedient of tearing out the servos with his power armor enhanced strength as he did so. Simultaneously, Linda almost casually bounced a heavy sniper round off the upper curve of a Jackals shield to tear through the body of yet another Grunt behind the wall and wing a second, the remaining diminutive aliens at that point throwing their hands up and running for the dubious cover of the next bay and the other Covenant troops there as they broke. "I don't think it'll make them hold back for long".

"Then we can't waste time" the Chief pointed out, before he frowned and looked again at the huge gun James was carrying. If it could blow right through an _Elites_ shield without slowing down...

"Blue-Two, up front" he ordered. "Break up the Jackals formation and see what you can do about the rest of them. Blue-One, I'm going for the _Circumference_. Cover me".

Lights blinked blue on his HUD and James moved up behind him, getting a firm grip on his weapon. John checked again that his assault rifle was attached to his armors magnetic clamps before grabbing handholds on either side of the airlock and pulling himself forward hard, flinging himself at speed above the first level catwalk towards his target, trusting his path to Sir Isaac Newton, and his safety to his comrades.

The launch wasn't perfect, he picked up a slight rotation as one of the handrails warped from the strain of his power armor enhanced strength pulling on it, but he dared not try to correct it, he was more or less on course and speed, and right now, speed was life.

The rotation also happened to give him probably the best view he could have asked for as James popped up from behind the walkway he had hid behind, cradling his confiscated weapon carefully as he opened fire into the center of the Jackals shield wall.

A pair of long orange bolts sizzled down directly into the packed Jackals, their close formation with overlapping shields dooming them as the orange bolt impacted and washed over several of the overlapping shields, shorting them out in blue explosions of plasma and throwing a half dozen Jackals back like bowling pins from a terrific kinetic release of some kind. The next bolt followed a fraction of a second later and hit the floor where they had just been standing, exploding the grating there like a fragmentation bomb just behind the remaining shields, shredding the line and sending Jackals â€"and parts of the same- exploding in all three dimensions throughout the bay.

Moments later, a pair of Elites from the forward assault force, one in deep blue and one in bloody scarlet came hurrying back to the disintegrating reserve force with a Hunter pair in tow, the two massive walking tanks stomping forward malevolently in the Elites wake through -and at least twice _over_- the grunts still running around in terror there, their inbuilt fuel rod cannons starting to come up under instruction from the Elites towards James, none of the quartet even glancing in the direction of the Chief as he silently sailed by down the far bulkhead...just as a brilliant white explosion of light burst in from outside the station.

The launch bay space doors tinted slightly and filtered out some of

the light, and what was left was automatically eliminated by the adaptive visors on the Spartans power suits and Marines vac Suits, but the Elites and Hunters staggered for a moment at the flash. It proved to be a moment too long though, as Linda placed two precise shots through the atmospheric field generators on each of the Hunters suits as they instinctively contracted against the flash of light and exposed the circuitry to attack. Designed not to deflect weapons fire but to maintain an standard atmospheric pressure around the Hunters, the field collapsed in milliseconds and doomed the Mgalekgolo colonies, the decompression tearing the two creatures apart before they could brace themselves, let alone try to protect themselves from the hard vacuum, before Linda switched targets and neatly put the last two rounds from her clip through each Elites head on the move as she kicked off from her perch to relocate.

The somewhat gruesome sight however vanished for the Chief as the _Circumference _came back into view right in front of him. Judging his moment carefully, his hands shot out at a convenient protrusion from the sleek black 'yacht' and crashed to a bone jarring halt that actually bent the tough spaceframe somewhat, reminding him again that while he had no weight in Zero-G, he _did _have massâ€|and there were limits even to _his _strength.

None the less he had reached his goal and as quickly as he dared, he swung his legs back down into contact with the hull, allowing the magnetic seal to re-establish as he 'stood', now oriented somewhat perpendicular to the bay decks, but not taking notice as he strode quickly forward towards the bow of the ship to seek entry.

He found he was not alone when he arrived; one of the Marines from the fire team had already made his way over, and with a shaped charge no less, surprising the Chief. To get from the hastily rigged barricade below to the ship in such a short space of time, to say nothing of having the presence of mind to take advantage of the break in the fighting as the men mopped up the last of the Grunts to complete the mission...

It spoke of a highly skilled and focused Marine. His IFF Tag declared he was one STF-SSGT JOHNSON...

...And although the Chief didn't have the first clue why, for one microsecond as he came to a halt where the Marine was finishing setting the C-12 breaching charge, suddenly something felt very _right _about his presence here.

Shaking off the odd thought, he brought his attention to the mission once more as the Sergeant finished his work with an ease and smoothness that said much of his experience, looking up at the Chief as hand hovered over the timer. The Chief shot him a quick '5' hand signal, the junior NCO nodding and setting the timer before swinging off and under the ship where he would be protected from the blast, the Chief likewise retreating behind the flaring of the ships starboard wing and making sure his shields were set to full as he braced himself.

A loud explosion rattled through his boots into his armor, like the sound of some huge bell _cracking _under stress as the breaching charge detonated, shattering the cockpit windows like tissue paper. He was in motion even before the last of the shrapnel bounced off his shields, moving along the hull into a diving roll that let him

somersault through the breach into the wrecked command deck.

"Blue-Leader" Linda's voice broke in as he reached for the access panel in the floor where the database chip would be, "_massive_ motion contacts inbound from all directions, the station is _crawling_. Blue-Two is powering one of the Pelicans for hot dust off"

As always, each member of Blue Team could damn near read the minds of the others, guessing what was likely to be the next move. Flashing his blue acknowledgement light, the Chief pulled the access panel off next to the Captains chair and quickly found the objective, the small pink NAV Database crystal.

It was tiny he noted distantly as he removed it from its slot. The size of his thumbâ€¦such a small thing to cause so much trouble.

No more.

A quick tightening of his hand into a fist instantly crushed the crystal against the unyielding pressure of his armor, nothing but a fine powder of pink shards drifting out as he opened his hand again, the crystalline lattice that held the data destroyed well past the point of no return.

One small victory for the day. Earth was safe...at least for a while.

"Mission accomplished" he broadcasted as he hurried for the entrance which now became his exit. "Blue-One, find the manual release-"

"Already got it Master Chief" an unfamiliar voice broke in over his line, his HUD board showing that it belonged to Sergeant Johnson who indeed had hustled over to the nearest door and the emergency release next to it, slamming a fist into a large red button, then yanking at the heavy lever that exposed itself, the massive floor to ceiling space doors starting to retract on backup battery power.

"Blue-Team, Marines, fall back, fall back" the Chief ordered over the general UNSC ground frequency as he emerged through the hole in the side of the ship and kicked down to the deck where the Marines had made their stand, the charcoal grey vac-suits of the remaining four members of the squad hustling for the Pelican carrying the bodies of two others, but he paused for a moment to take in the mess Linda and James had made of the main body of Covenant troops.

And mess was probably the best word for it. Blue and purple alien blood had splattered all over the place, sticking to whatever surfaced it collided with. The two Hunters, always so terrifying and imposing on the ground had 'leaked' all over the floor in an orange stain, their almost impervious armor scattered around the floor as the worm colonies had lost all cohesion when the atmospheric pressure had been cut, fused bits of flesh and metal clouding the air as a result of the weapons fire from James.

He made a mental note to find out where James had gotten _that_ weapon from, guessing it was a Covenant prototype or special issue weapon. Hopefully, he would get a closer look later on, and hopefully

do so before Jorge-052 saw it, his heavy weapons specialist having the most vexing habit of 'borrowing' the newest toys NAVSPECWEP delivered to the Spartan IIs without the slightest intention of giving them back, at least until the _next _new 'toy' came along...

The dull thud of an explosion and corresponding blue flash of a plasma grenade detonation from the direction of the door James had forced shut, however, brought his focus back to the present quite quickly. He hurried the last few meters to the ship and crashed up the ramp just behind Sergeant Johnson, the trio of Marines already strapping in as Linda hit the ramp controls, a swarm of red dots starting to pour into docking bay as he made for the cockpit.

"We've got company Boss" Blue-Two said unnecessarily as the Chief vaulted up into the navigator/gunnery station behind the pilots chair as the ship lifted, pleased to see that James had brought the weapons systems online without needing to be asked. Automatically, his suit interfaced through the cockpit datalink pilot helmets used and switched his HUD switched over to FLIGHT mode as he brought the weapons array online, targeting crosshairs and tactical displays materializing as his HUD the enemy came into view.

The first Grunts, Jackals and Elites stormed into the bay from the door they had blown open, spilling out along the catwalk the Spartans had occupied only minutes ago as the ship came to a hover, plasma weapons clutched in their fists glowing ominously as they overcharged them and started to point towards the cockpit...

...making them the first to die.

The chin-mounted 40mm rotary cannon blazed away smoothly as the Chief overrode the safety interlock that would normally have prevented him from firing inside the hanger bay and squeezed his triggers, swinging the lead computing aim point smoothly from left to right through the largest concentration of enemy forces. A cloud of shrapnel and gore exploded from the catwalk, joined by the few survivors jumping desperately for the ceiling or the deck to get out of the way as the rest quite sensibly hesitated in pushing through the breach point, all in all providing plenty of time for James to back them out of the bay and spin around, before kicking in the main thrusters and shooting them away from the station and into space...

...Which, rather suspiciously was empty of the salvos of plasma, missiles and cannon fire that should have been there from the massive dogfight that had supposedly been raging through the shipyards.

James increased the throttle to full anyway, and started an almost automatic evasive routine, loathe to fly straight and level in what by all logic should have been an intense combat zone, but the Chief ordered him to ease off after a glance at the navigators enhanced tactical displays confirmed nothing but green transponder signals in close orbit...and what could only be the remains of a _massive_ explosion between the planet and Csodaszarvas, its closest moon, a ring of debris and vapor tinged in orange and yellows still slowly expanding, long range imagery on the data-net placing targeting brackets around the shattered remains of Covenant warships around the periphery of what had to have been one _hell _of an explosion.

"Well I'll be damned" James whispered softly as they both stared at what John realized must have been the source of the white flash he had noted inside the docking bay. "They did it...they really did it".

"So it appears" John replied evenly as he scrolled down the Pelicans communication board looking for the Pillar of Autumn, starting an upload of the secure encryption schemes RED FLAG was using from his armors COM system at the same time, as he conceded that it did appear that against all odds, the Covenant assault had been not just repelled, but broken. _

Even stranger, he found the Autumn in a higher orbit then the bulk of the surviving fleet that had dispersed into task groups to start mop up and recovery operations with, of all things, an ONI defined 'no go zone' bubble painted on his tactical map around both the Autumn, and another ship shown in the yellow of for 'Non-Hostile Unknown' next to her, with at least a half dozen Pelican dropships shown as on inbound vectors for the Autumn from both Vice Admiral Whitcomb's flagship the Trafalgar and Reach itself.

Very Odd.

Finally, the communications board pinged that it had incorporated the new encryption scheme. Activating the link, he gave the success code word for Blue Team and was just about to tell James to abort his approach and instead head for Reach and RED TEAM on the surface when his board suddenly went black as a higher priority override cut in. Moments later, Cortana herself materialized on the holographic pedestal next to the pilot's station, glancing first at him and then James, an eyebrow raised in a manner that for just a second, reminded the Master Chief almost overwhelmingly of Doctor Halsey for some reason.

"I have to admit Petty Officer, I am impressed" the AI said cheerfully to the junior Spartan, crossing her tiny arms over her chest as she studied the person in the pilot's chair. "I always pegged the Master Chief as the lucky Spartan...but you may well have just completely skewed the scale today for the entire human race".

John's frown depended somewhat at the comment that was odd, even by Cortanas standards, but before he could ask, Cortana had already turned towards him.

"Chief, I take it from the codeword that your mission was accomplished without any particular trouble?"

"It was accomplished" he corrected her, thinking about how close they had come to losing James and guessing that Cortana must have been watching their insertion from the Autumn and been referring to his slim escape from death in her earlier comments. "I could have done with your help, at a couple of points".

"So you did miss me" she replied lightly with a smile, before her attitude turned more serious again as James started his deceleration burn onto the final approach. "Good news from RED team, they deployed with the Daredevils successfully and were able to repel a rather serious attack on the generator complex with some, shall we say, rather creative tactics?" she suggested, before the smile on her face

faded a little, along with her color to a purple hue. "I have to report though, that four Spartans were injured in the battle. They'll live and are expected to make a full recovery, but they'll probably need some recovery time before being cleared for Field Ops again".

"Understood" he replied in a neutral tone that somewhat masked his relief. Against such an overwhelming attack and fighting a defensive battle in a fixed position, getting off with so few injured, and injured non-critically, was somewhat surprising, given the difficulty of holding a fixed position against a numerically superior mobile force with plenty of firepower to spare. And as he ran his eyes over the fleet transponder lists, he couldn't help but note that while some ships were clearly gone that had been active before, the numbers were actually not substantially lower either, almost as if instead of the typical loss ratio of three to one UNSC ships for each Covenant ship, the Covenant had lost eight ships for every UNSC ship...which was impossible.

The Covenant Supercarrier alone should have taken a bloody price in ships and people to eliminate, yet it was clearly marked as a destroyed contact right in the middle of that massive explosion...

Something was not...right here. And as the unknown Human ship came fully into view as James started his final approach towards the Autumn, following Cortana's helpfully plotted NAV markers, the AI having no doubt cleared their approach through the ONI 'Red-Zone', the feeling only grew in the Master Chiefs mind that something big had happened while they were on the station.

"Back on topic" Cortana continued, once again turning to face James. "Spartan...this may sound a little crazy...but can you please clarify precisely what you have been doing over the last twelve hours?"

Okay...that really is a crazy question, the Master Chief silently agreed, knowing full well what the Spartan had been doing during that time -and knowing that Cortana knew as well!

At least until James started to answer the question.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2. Reach - Part 1

Time Indeterminate, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar)|

>USS **Odyssey**,**_**Epsilon Eridani System**_**

"Is there anything else you need?"

"No, not at this time Sergeant"

"The General will call you as soon-"

"-as he finishes talking with his staff" Petty Officer Second Class James-005 finished for the man in dull olive fatigues, who at least had the grace to look somewhat abashed at the none too subtle

reminder of the fact that James did remember the reason he was here.

"Well Sir, if you need anything, just let the airman outside know. Chow will be served in just over an hour, but if you want anything, we can have the galley bring up something. Or if you want to check your gear, we can take you to the engineering bay, the General was insistent that you be given access at any time".

"Thank you Sergeant" he nodded at the other, not exactly happy with the reminder of how he had been separated from his armour, even if it had been moments away from shutting down and turning him into a work of modern art thanks to the damage it had taken in the thruster pack explosion, but respectful of the fact that he was being treated as a guest, even to the extent that Landry and his officers had pointedly not made any comment when he had strapped on his M6D after exiting his suit, a measure of trust he appreciated in reciprocation for leaving the rest of his gear, highly classified gear, in their hands to see if they could at least perform basic field repairs on it. "I'll head down to get some chow later".

The other nodded, and to his mild surprise, offered him a crisp salute. Given that the US Non-Com wasn't in or formally allied with the UNSC it was clearly not given out of protocol, but out of respect and so James did him the courtesy of returning it smoothly, before stepping back and shutting the hatch.

The thick door was surprisingly light, but he suspected whatever advanced materials it was made out of were probably quite durable. And although James did not hear any locking mechanisms activate inside it, he still couldn't help but feel like a prisoner as it securely closed with an airtight seal, one that isolated him in the room quite effectively.

Of course it was really an illusion; he wasn't being held here against his will. It had been made clear to him several times that if he wished, he could have been put down on Reach or any ship in orbit around it in a matter of minutes...and he was honest enough to admit he would have felt much more comfortable even in Zero-G combat, then on this ship. So close yet so far away from home, like the ships namesake Odysseys, the Greek hero D  j   had told him about so long ago  |

But he couldn't leave. Not now, not after everything he had learned, everything he had been shown.

Mere days ago, he and his teammates had been given what might well have been their final mission orders; to proceed deep into Covenant controlled space and 'retrieve' a senior Prophet 'Hierarch', the highest level of the Covenant leadership, and deliver it alive back to Earth in the hope that Earth could open negotiations for some kind of cease fire or negotiated peace.

Of course, such a straight forward matter of fact mission briefing didn't hide the fact that it could best be described as a long shot, if not an outright suicide mission, even for thirty Spartans. He knew it, HIGHCOM knew it and the rest of the Spartans knew it  |but as much as ONI's Section One PR people might try to put a positive spin on the war, James knew full well that humanity was finding itself increasingly 'on the ropes'. The UNSC had been grudgingly pressed

back well inside the Inner Colonies, the Covenant juggernaut inexorably advancing towards Earth light year by light year. The Fleets victory at Sigma Octanus IV, loudly trumpeted mere weeks ago as yet another strategic turning point in the war, had ultimately amounted to little more than another bloody tactical victory. And now the Covenant had found Reach, the largest industrial center outside Sol itself, almost within spitting distance of Earth...

Pushing aside the dark thoughts running through his head, James finally took in his quarters with a brief glance finding to his mild surprise that they were almost luxurious compared to the barracks facilities and cramped rack space he usually called home on UNSC ships. It included what looked suspiciously like a real bed, a computer terminal at a small desk and even a private head off to the side.

And he also had a view.

Walking up to the large widow on the far bulkhead of the room, James stood silently for a long time, taking in the frozen sight of the battle around the shipyards he had been 'beamed' from, aligning his vision with the tactical displays he had been shown on the Odyssey's bridge. A number of Covenant Destroyers and Frigates had performed precision Slipspace jumps into the highly congested space, unleashing hoards of Seraph fighters and Phantom dropships pressed into a light bomber role against the fleet yards, most of the small craft launching before many of the Covenant ships had been surgically 'removed' by the high orbit Super-MAC stations that had clean shots, as others pushed deeper into the yards, clearly in his mind after the same thing that Blue Team was.

Staring at the distant wheel of Gamma station behind countless frameworks of slipways and space stations, James wanted nothing more than to get over there right now, and finish the fight with John and Linda, to beat the Covenant to their prize ... but again he reminded himself that he had been given a unique opportunity here that he could simply not afford to lose, an opportunity far more valuable to the UNSC, than a Navigational Database was to the Covenant. And given that he had been gifted all the time in the world thanks to their incredible time dilation technology, it was his duty to sit here -until time ended if necessary- and get these people on their side.

Sighing softly, he turned away from the disturbing view and moved to the desk, sitting down in the chair bolted to the deck. From his pocket, he pulled out a tiny mission recorder module and its memory stick that he had removed from one of his suits storage compartments. Similar to the mission recorders used by Marines, the device had been issued to Spartans should any need come up to record secure messages or transfer data by hand to a courier in the field outside their armour and was equipped with a tiny camera and microphone that could store days worth of video. Setting it on the desk and activating it, he started to dictate his initial report to command while his memory was still fresh. This very long day - that showed no signs of ending yet- had been almost surreal for him, yet he felt that his hosts had simply taken it in stride, as if these sorts of things happened to them as a matter of routine. When he had asked for proof of their seemingly absurd sounding claims, they had simply 'beamed' him and them to the ships hanger bay, where they had shown off several other advanced technologies far beyond the UNSC, all of which

had left him feeling as stunned as when a Covenant Brute had backhanded him halfway across a rather large room many years ago.

Combined with the replay of what they had done to the Covenant Super Cruiser, he had decided quickly that it would do far more harm than good to play coy with the true state of the UNSC war effort. Instead, hiding little about the increasingly dire straits Earth had found itself in of late, knowing somehow that the truth would be far more compelling to get their attention and involvement than any lies about the UNSC holding their own in a bloody stalemate, as ONI still broadcast everywhere.

It had not all been a one way conversation though, the General and his officers had been surprisingly open and straight forward about their history too. Like all Spartans, James had an IQ that rated at the genius level and he could grasp the idea of a parallel quantum reality easily enough as Colonel Carter had explained it â€| but it was still almost impossible for him to accept the differences between his universe and this 'alternate reality'.

Countless alien races - and more than a few of them not out for the destruction of humanity but actually stepping in to help it every now and again.

Humans spread across the entire Galaxy - Galaxies - through the use of an advanced point to point FTL transport system using artificial wormholes, built by an ancient civilization long gone.

Incredible, almost magical technologies that made the advanced technology of the Covenant look almost like children's toys, and all set against an Earth that was technically still way back in the 21st century?

To say the story he had been told was slightly unbelievable would be underselling it substantially ... and yet in an oddly perverse way, the fact that they had come forward with such an unbelievable story helped sell it to him. Anyone could come up with a more conceivable lie with far less effort than this, and, ultimately, they certainly had the technology to back up their claims.

Leaving him somewhat lost for where to go from here. As a hardened soldier of twenty years combat experience, he had been forced to adapt to rapidly changing situations as a matter of life or death on a daily basis â€| but this?

Still, it had become clear to him early on that these people were far from set on staying and fighting the Covenant. Understandable given that their focus was clearly on getting back to their own universe and their own war which had their own Earth in great danger, but it was also clear that they had been taken aback by the massive scope of the death and destruction the Covenant had inflicted on the UNSC for two decades, as much he suspected for the death toll, as for the fact that even today no-one really understood why the Covenant hated humanity so much.

And so he had given it his best shot at convincing them when they had reconvened after their little tour, listing the worlds 'glassed', the single real communication from the Covenant to Earths Government that had become a dark legend; That 'humanities destruction was the will

of the Gods, and the Covenant were their instruments', the decades long war that had slowly pushed them back closer and closer to Earth...

And finally, he had gathered his courage and asked the question that could make or break the human race.

"General...can you help us? _Will_ you help us?"

The room was somewhat emptier now, with only James, General Landry and Colonel Mitchell present. Colonel Carter was studying his gear down in an engineering bay, something he was not entirely happy with given the incredible cost and sensitivity of it, but hardly in a position to complain either. Daniel Jackson had taken Valla 'away', the hint that her sharp mouth was not suited to this stage of the interviews not exactly subtle.

And as for Teal'c...

James didn't honestly know where the man had gone. He had vanished from behind him as the group had turned a corner on his tour of the ship without him even realizing, no small feat against his augmented hearing, but he would put good money on the man being close by watching him, James idly wondering if the man would agree to a sparring session at some point in the future, feeling that it would be the only way he could get a measure of the man, albeit a _friendly_ sparring session, as he doubted the 'Jaffa Master' had been biologically and physically augmented like he had.

Presently, his attention was drawn back to General Landry as he exhaled softly, the man leaning forward to appraise him with an open and sympathetic face that still neither promised nor denied anything.

"Chief... this really isn't our war" he said finally. "Hell Son, this isn't even our universe, we have more than enough problems back in our own without getting involved in a full scale war in yours. I have a responsibility to my crew, my country and my world to get home as soon as possible with this ship, and I can't let _anything_ distract me from that, given the stakes back home".

The man paused for a second and let his lip twitch slightly as James forced himself with iron control to not react in any way to the statement.

"But..." the other continued with a deep breath as he sat back in his chair, "the simple fact is that for better or worse, we're stuck here. It could be a days, it could take months, or even longer before we're able to duplicate the process that got us here if" he continued, as a grimace passed across his face, "if it's even possible at all".

"And it's safe to say that we would be more likely to get home with the scientific resources of a major power like the UNSC behind us, rather than striking out on our own" Mitchell put in, and James killed the urge to nod in thanks at him for his interjection of support. "To say nothing of logistical support if we're going to be stuck here for a while".

"Which is the heart of the problem" Landry agreed, looking back at

James with an intense expression. "Clearly, in any alliance with the UNSC, there would have to be a quid pro quo of some kind involved, and it doesn't take a genius to guess what your people are going to ask for in return for the kind of support we might request".

James acknowledged the obvious point, but while he had found success being direct with these people, and they with him, he really didn't have the authority to speak on behalf of his Government and so he found himself at something of a loss of what to say.

Oddly enough though, he got the feeling that General Landry understood that fact perfectly well as the other leaned back in his chair, tapping a pen absently against the pages of notes he had scrawled on a pad over the last few hours and considering his position for a long time before speaking back up.

"I've been in the same shoes as your leaders are going to be in soon, Spartan" he finally continued after an indeterminate amount of time. "Last year we encountered a similar universal crossover event; a group identical to my SG1 came through from another universe, supposedly by accident. What we learned almost too late was that their crossover was a deliberate Black Op; they had come to steal some incredibly valuable technology from us for their own uses. Not because they were evil, not because they had anything against us personally â€| but because of their honest belief in the _necessity_ of their actions to save their Earth. And sitting here now, I will admit Petty Officer that I wonder if your leadership, out of that same desperate necessity, might not end up making _my_ people a target if we present a similar temptation to them.

James mentally bristled at the rather direct implications before he forced himself to banish the unhelpful indignation, placing it behind the cold realization that the General didn't have any ability to predict how the UNSC would react, seeing through the flat statements to the Generals genuine and very real concerns for the safety of his men and success of his mission, as any good officer must.

Instead, James admitted to himself that even _he_ didn't know how the UNSC was going to react to this incredible opportunity, knowing full well that some of the worst excesses of ONI had indeed not just crossed the line of 'necessity', but leapt over it with an M-Spec Re-entry pack; the Spartan III Program being a cold example of _that_. And that introducing to the _Odyssey_ to the equation could lead to running gunfights in the corridors of ONI's HQ back on Earth over who got to be 'on point' for such a game changing opportunity in the tangle of interests and authorities that made up the shadowy organization.

Yet despite his voiced concerned, the General turned away to gaze out the window at the vast swath of the battle raging on in that frozen moment, his expression hardening slightly as he did so, as if he was forcing himself to stare Reach 'in the face'.

"The Asgard called us 'The Fifth Race' " he continued, the man talking as much to himself as them now, James thought. "I never really understood what that hell that even _meant_, but then I wasn't with the SGC at the beginning. I never had to sit in Hammonds chair as hundreds of Goa'uld Motherships assembled to burn our world to the ground, without the luxury of ships or drones or even allies to fight back with, if they decided that our extermination was easier than

enslavement. I never witnessed how the Asgard made the choice to step between us and the Goa'uld simply because it was the right thing to do, when no-one else would or could".

The other abruptly stood, pushing away from the table and walking to the windows; studying the perfectly frozen moment of the firefight outside in silence. The bulk of the blue orb of Reach remained placidly in place underneath them, wreathed in the green glow of a distant nebula, the terminator between night and day not too far off. Past it, faintest red smudge showed on the surface, where a firestorm big enough to be seen from orbit was raging through the infinity of the frozen moment, the sight putting into stark context exactly what was at stake in this meeting for everyone.

"And now here we are" Landry continued, tilting his head slightly as he stared down at the planet. "The only thing standing between a race just as fanatical as the Ori and a human culture we know nothing about, who might help us or might hurt us. So the question is, do I walk away and try not to listen to the screams of hundreds of millions of people? Or do I draw a line in the sand and say enoughâ€| because it's probably the right thing to do today, and worry about tomorrow, tomorrow?"

With that, General Landry turned away from the battle towards them, Colonel Mitchell rising to his feet in response and James joining him a heartbeat later, both studying the flag officers face that was now set in stone without the slightest trace of indecision on it, only the certainty of a man who had made his decision and was going to see it through to the endâ€|and James in that moment knew exactly what decision he had made.

**0553 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>UNSC _**Pillar of Autumn**_**, Assault Orbit, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System**

They called it Hells Waiting Room.

Deep in the bowels of the Halcyon class Cruiser, under the ships massive fusion plant and just above the lowest part of the ventral hull was a chamber. It was long, almost four hundred meters long in fact, sub-divided into twenty meter long compartments separated by blast doors. In the centre of each compartment, back to back, were two rows of four teardrop shaped objects, held in place by massive yellow guide rails.

They looked rather unimpressive; drab charcoal coloured boxes with a name stencilled on the upper lip and little else, but in truth, they were anything but dull. Officially designated 'Single Occupant Exoatmospheric Insertion Vehicles' in the best traditions of bureaucrats trying to find the longest and most verbose way of naming things, they were more commonly known as 'Human Entry Vehicles' in the military, or 'Express Elevators to Hell' to the people crazy enough to get into them, designed for the single purpose of getting troops from orbit to the ground faster and safer than using either dropships or troopships, especially in the face of heavy anti-air defences.

Of course, 'safer' was an entirely subjective statement. As the ceramic skin that covered the pod heated during atmospheric entry, the air inside the pod did tend to become incredibly hot, sometimes

fatally so if the angle of descent was too steep or if too much of the shell burned off. Add to that the possibility of the HEV's chute or retro-rockets failing meaning you impacted the ground hard enough to plow several meters under it -a fate known to users of the system as 'digging your own grave'- and it would be no surprise that the primary users of the system were considered equally as crazy as they were utterly fearless.

They were the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. The Helljumpers.

Marines had to serve at least a full tour before applying to the Helljumpers, and few would be so cocky as to apply before serving at least two or even three tours. They were a somewhat unique bunch in the UNSC; hardened veterans all who had, if not a _death wish_, then at least an indifference to the very real possibility of dying when taking a HEV Shortcut into a combat zone given that being the first in against often superior enemy forces often meant you were the first to die. Typically deployed anything between an hour to a day ahead of the follow on Marine units in a planetary assault, they specialized in securing LZs for heavier Dropship born follow on forces to land, taking out enemy surface to air systems and key command and control targets, throwing the enemy into confusion while the main force landed, all the while knowing that there would be no quick extraction should things go bad.

It was a High Risk - High Reward all volunteer unit with the proud distinction of being the most elite Marine formation in the entire UNSC...which made it unsurprising that a rivalry had existed between the ODS'T's and NAVSPECWEP's Spartan II program for about as long as the Spartan II's had been public knowledge, a rivalry not helped by the fact that the semi-secret confirmed kill count of the thirty active Spartans exceeded the collective wartime scores of the top three _Regiments _of the Elite 105th Division, combined.

Still, for the most part, the one way rivalry had been held to just that; a modest grudge mixed with grudging admiration for the Spartans accomplishments and kill count. However some ODS'Ts held a much lower opinion of their 'competition', among them one Major Antonio Silva; a highly decorated ODS'T with almost a decade's worth of combat experience being kicked out of perfectly good starships. He had in fact been the first choice to lead the ODS'T unit in RED FLAG, right up until ONI mission planners had interviewed the man and found his opinions on the Spartan II Program in general, and John-117 in specific, to be...curt.

Understandable perhaps once he had explained himself and his 'history' with the Spartans, but rather unhelpful and unprofessional none the less, ruling him out of the mission.

Instead, a provisional ODS'T battalion handpicked by Vice Admiral Michael Stanforth, the new head of ONI Section-III, had been placed under the command newly promoted Major Veronica Dare. A former ODS'T but current ONI Section-I officer, the Major's combat record spoke for itself, and the military planners had looked favourably on someone with a great deal of covert operations and intelligence experience to back up the Spartans on this mission. She in turn had brought in, although some would say 'conscripted', Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck and his Special Action squad from the 31st Drop Jet Company into her command platoon as the core of her leadership group, promoting him to Master Sergeant in the same orders; all in all ensuring that the

Autumn had been granted the best possible Marine unit to give the mission the best possible shot.

Except ... the job had run into a slight snag before it had even started.

Hells waiting room, which should have been empty for several weeks yet was now ringing to the sound of polished combat boots pounding on the deck as ODS'Ts swarmed into the compartment. NCOs yelled profanity laden insults encouraging the men and women under their command to move faster, the Marines checking their weapons as they jumped into the waiting pods and started to strap themselves in, or stood in line for the next wave of pods that would instantly snap down into place once the first wave were gone from the upper storage racks.

In the middle of the chaos, the entry of Major Veronica Dare and Master Sergeant Edward Buck, all but anonymous in the signature jet-black ODS'T combat suits, went unnoticed. Troops continued to pour into the bay, more than a few checking gear out or tightening their suits seals up, having been caught on the hop as it were by the sudden change in orders from 'Counter-Boarding Stations' to 'Drop-Stations', and paying for it as NCO's mercilessly singled out the slightly slower people for special attention as they had been doing since the dawn of time.

"When I agreed to this assignment, I didn't think my first action would be leading the Battalion into a combat drop on Reach" Dare reflected as she and her senior NCO stepped away from the door and into the small gap between the left and right hatches along the entrance bulkhead, as troops continued to pour through past them.

"I hear that" the NCO shrugged as he leaned back against the wall, his expression almost casual in stark contrast to the tension flowing through the bay. "And you kept saying I never took you to any interesting places Veronica..."

The Major shot him a glare that didn't really reach her eyes, aiming to poke him hard in the chest before thinking better of it as she took in the outer ceramic layer on the armour there and instead letting her knuckles rap on his chest plate.

"That's 'I never took you any place interesting _Ma'am' _"she deadpanned back at him before removing her hand and her tone became serious again. "Frankly, I just wish we'd had more time for training. Everyone here was handpicked, but team cohesion doesn't come instantly, even to ODS'Ts".

"We'll manage" the other said with a confident tone in his voice. "We've got a good NCO and Junior Officer team and we're just being asked to hold the fort or, more likely the Spartans drinks while they play defend the castle. This hot drop could be just what we need to iron out any kinks in the unit before we push off on RED FLAG for real".

Left unsaid between them but 'said' none the less in the way all good officers and NCOs could communicate with each other was the question of how many people would be pulled out of this operation alive. The Covenant were hitting Reach in force, that much was clear even to people like them well outside the naval 'need to know'. Having apparently failed with their covert infiltration tactics, they had

fallen back on the tired old 'bring in a fleet and level the place' thing; the orbital MAC guns apparently the only thing keeping the enemy at bay. Worse, the Covenant had, according to Cortana's rapid briefing, snuck in a significant new ground force near the orbital guns groundside reactors to try and knock them completely out of the fight and it was their job, along with the Spartans tagging along -or vice versa if she was to be honest- to keep the reactors running at any cost.

Still, it would offer a chance to 'test' how well her command and the Spartans could integrate in a real operation, she supposedâ€|

"They'd better" was all the Major said in response to her NCO, the implied consequences to anyone who screwed up heard loud and clear through this part of the bay as she slapped the bulkhead mounted intercom next to the hatch. "Cortana, you have the LZ updates for me?"

"In the pod with Wellesley Ma'am" the AI replied instantly, multi-tasking as she flew the ship, kept an eye on Blue Team's Pelican as it flew around the planet towards Anchor-1 and did what she could for the ground operation. "Orbital's are unreliable due to extensive cloud cover and smoke from the various tracts of vegetation that are burning out of control, but thermals and radar pictures have tracks on probable Covenant LZ's around the Big Horn River basin, two I peg with a ninety percent probability, one with a fifty percent â€| I don't have any tracks on the third, but their pattern would be highly atypical for a Covenant assault force without it being present. Estimated strength; Battalion size".

"Any good news?" Dare asked dryly as the number of Marines moving into the compartment slacked off quickly to zero, followed by the last of her NCOs from outside, who stormed up in the wake of the tardy jarheads, insinuating that their much older female relatives could move much faster than said Marines could.

"Red Team should be with you in about thirty seconds" Cortana replied, either not hearing or just ignoring the shouting in the background. "I've confirmed a Marine unit, designation Charlie Company, is on-site downstairs preparing defence. They report no contact so far, but they are picking up a lot of Covenant chatter not too far away. I've found a flight of Shortsword Bombers and parked them in a holding orbit if you want them, and I'm trying to get some friends to provide you with air cover, if I can find where on Reach they have run off to without telling anyone â€|"

Dare blinked and shared a startled look with her senior NCO.

"You managed to get all that done in five minutes?" she asked in a somewhat incredulous tone.

"I'm also working on getting an extraction option available for you, should everything go wrong up here" the AI said by way of reply. "I've marked several possible secure fallback positions for extraction with your AI, and I'm looking at getting some transport options sufficient for the Battalion ready, if you need to get off-world quickly".

Buck blinked at the news and let a slight smile cross his face at the

AI's initiative and efficiency.

"I think I'm in love" he said in a sotto voice at his ex Girlfriend, who simply rolled her eyes...

"...And I think you only have room for one hyper-lethal rated woman in your life Sergeant" the AI retorted sweetly from the speaker having clearly overheard, causing the NCO to rock back on his feet at the quip, Dare in turn working her jaw slightly at the implied comment she never would have expected an AI to ever make as she glanced around the room at the ODSs, daring any of them to snicker behind their faceplates, yet knowing they all surely were. "I'll be listening in on SATCOM-Eight Bravo if you need me, I'll keep Wellesley updated" she finished, killing the channel with an audible 'click' before either of the Marines could reply.

Predictably, it was Lance Corporal Kojo Agu, strapping himself into a HEV, who broke the silence.

"I like her".

"Corporal, if you don't want to float from here to the LZ without the benefit of your HEV, shut your mouth" Buck ordered with a rather dangerous tone in his voice that the other predictably took little notice of.

"Aye Aye Sarge" came the far too cheerful reply.

The sudden feeling in the deck of a lot of people in power armour getting close however, forestalled the former Gunnery Sergeant moving to throw the junior NCO out the nearest airlock, as two lines of towering green figures came through the doors at a pace sufficient to cause the deck to vibrate in sympathy. They moved fluidly, with a minimum of effort, yet conveyed a sense of restrained power that was as awesome as it was controlled. Dare had assigned the Spartans the aft most HEV pod bays, partially because it was then easier to secure that section to their access only, but mostly because of what now happened to her people as they moved past. She could see the sudden awe and boost to morale in the her people that had taken a hit when the first reports about the Covenant on Reach had surfaced, the finest warriors humanity had to offer stiffening the resolve of the ODSs as they calmly moved past to join them on this mission. Few UNSC troops ever saw a Spartan in the flesh; to see almost thirty of them jog past and carrying enough weapons to make a UNSC Marine Division think twice was something almost unheard of, and she could almost feel the electric air of excitement and expectation replacing the prevailing tension in her handpicked team.

The final Spartan in halted at the door, sealing it behind him as per procedure before turning to face her, indistinguishable from the others in his or her armour, yet carrying a clear air of command as he snapped an utterly perfect salute that would have let any DI die happy to just see it.

"Ma'am, Petty Officer Second Class Fred-104, acting commander of RED Team"

She returned the salute and nodded at the other.

"Good to see you Perry Officer" she replied. "I take it Cortana has

filled you in on the situation?"

"Yes Ma'am" he replied with a nod. "The Captain has placed by unit under your command for this drop, mission orders are to defend the Generator Complex using any and all necessary force".

Although the report was delivered with military precision and utterly correct in all ways, the spook part of her that was an expert on body language caught the tiny shifts in his posture and tone at that statement that said he was not exactly happy about the situation, albeit far too professional to let it interfere with his duty. Understandable enough; Spartans were almost never under the command of regular line units, if only because few had the in depth knowledge of their abilities and limitations to best use them in the field. Indeed for RED FLAG proper, the Spartans would in fact have 'Tactical Command' of the entire operation once Keyes disabled the enemy ship they were to board, regardless of rank or authority. It was something she had no real problems with - ONI work had a way of making one far more comfortable with somewhat blurry lines of authority - but in this situation, tying the Spartans too close to her command would negate most of what made them such incredibly deadly fighters.

Frankly, so long as everyone involved was working from the same script, she was perfectly happy to let the Spartans sow their own special brand of destruction, as long as it caused the Covenant the maximum amount of misery possible.

"Thank you Petty Officer. My intention is to directly deploy the Battalion to defend the generator complex directly. Spartans however, are offensive weapons. Your thoughts on optimal deployment for Red Team?"

She felt the other relax ever so slightly as she tossed the ball back into his court, letting him put forward his thoughts on how best to deploy his team in the defence of the Generator complex.

"Ma'am, I would respectfully suggest three teams deployed outside the perimeter to advance on the enemy LZ's and assess the situation directly, one in reserve in the base to deal with any unexpected situations. We can engage the enemy should an opportunity present itself to give us a tactical advantage, or blunt their offensive as we fall back on your position".

"Simple and straight forward, I concur" she nodded at the other, who she thought almost straightened slightly at the frank reply. "Deploy in the lead and set your LZ's at your own discretion. I'll be on Tac Sixteen, my AI on Tac Twenty, we will have limited air and fire support available, call it when you need it, but be prepared to fall back in a hurry if things go south upstairs" she said, stepping past him towards her own pod in the 001 position, Buck walking past her to his own pod several rows down as she started to strap herself in. "See you on the ground Spartan".

"Aye Aye Ma'am" the other said, snapping another picture perfect salute before moving off quickly as she secured her helmet around her somewhat non-regulation ponytail and double checked her straps, the pod hatch folding shut smoothly as she made herself comfortable. Power came on quickly, the half dozen green status screens of her command systems coming to life one after the other followed by the

two Multi Function Displays at her left and right knees which shifted to a tactical map of the area around the Generator Complex and a standby screen for the enhanced imaging and sensor systems her command pod held. Almost on autopilot, her hands worked through the checklists as she armed the release mechanisms and opened a channel to Lieutenant Hikowa, the ships tactical officer, noting the NAV markers for her units LZs and those of the Spartans that Fred-105 had already uploaded to her net, noting them before resetting the map scale for a wider view of the Area of Operations.

"Bridge, this is Daredevil Actual" she checked in using her assigned code name, long since beyond cringing at the callsign her 'friends' in boot had stuck her with, the add-hoc Battalion oddly enough loving it and adopting it as their unit name before she had even come on board...something she strongly suspected was -part of- her Master Sergeants revenge for dragging him along on this mission. "All personnel are in the green, we are ready for drop".

"Copy that Major" the Japanese officer replied from the bridge. "We will reach drop position in thirty seconds, say your drop order?"

"Drop order will be bays twenty, nineteen and eighteen, then one through seventeen at T plus thirty" she replied easily with a final check of her status board showing nothing but twenty green lights blinking, taking a firm but gentle grip on the twin joysticks at her left and right hands that controlled the three axis manoeuvring systems that would let her pilot her HEV should it become needed. "Ripple the rest as soon as they are loaded".

"Wilco" the other replied, static cutting through the communications link as the pod moved down into the launch chute, the airlock door above her snapping shut as the timer counted down towards zero before the thicker Titanium-A hull plate under her peeled back and her imaging systems came to life, showing the blue ball of Reach rotating placidly under her. "Godspeed Daredevils, stand by in five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... drop now now _now_!"

Simultaneous with the third 'Now', a shuddering ran through her pod as the first twenty nine were flung into the void, three withheld as empty pods assigned to Spartans James-005, Linda-058 and John-117. Two other pods were cargo pods packed with extra ammo and special issue weapons, but twenty seven of them carried a soldier that in her mind could legally be classified as a weapon of mass destruction. By sending the Spartans thirty pods first, she had given them a better chance to get in unseen by the enemy, thirty pods spread out into four groups might be missed or mistaken for space debris by enemy ground units—but the arrival of her five hundred pods in three close waves was going to be an unmistakable sight, especially at night.

Oh well, no time to worry about that now.

"Alright people, here we go" Buck called out on the Battalion wide as the last few seconds counted down. "Feet first..."

"INTO HELL!" five hundred ODST's shouted back as the timer reached zero and Cortana cheerfully evicted the first wave of her people out into freefall.

****0557 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /**

>Spartan-104 Command HEV, in combat drop to Reach, Epsilon Eridani System

Twenty Seven Spartans were now falling through space towards Reach. Debris from the Long Night of Solace's retreat up and through the defence grid littered no small part of Reach's lower orbits now, but Cortana and Captain Keyes had chosen their drop point well, their autopilots course locked into a narrow corridor free of any debris that might breach a HEV as they thundered down into Reach's gravity well.

If the AI had missed anything...well, none of them would probably feel the end given the speed they were moving. It was the sheer random uncertainty that could make even the most hardened of ODS'Ts find religion, but a quick look by Fred at Red Team's bio-monitors showed all twenty seven only had marginally accelerated pulse rates.

And he knew it wasn't the descent that had them slightly on edge. There were no such things as 'low risk' insertions for Spartans, which was simply the truth of their existence. HIGHCOM and ONI never sent them on 'easy jobs', to do so would be a waste of resources. No, if anything had them rattled, it was the fact that Blue Team with the Master Chief, Linda and James had been left behind on a far more dangerous mission. Every Spartan plunging towards Reach in the most dangerous spacecraft the UNSC deployed, designed by and built by the lowest bidder, couldn't help but feel they were taking the easy way out; all of them would vastly prefer to be with the Chief on his op rather than heading dirt side.

Shaking off the thought as it came to him again, Fred forced himself to focus on his priorities; his mission and his people, knowing that the Chief had picked him for command of this mission and Major Dare had given him freedom to operate as Spartans did best because both people trusted him ... and he refused to betray that trust by worrying over things that had already been decided.

The pod rocked slightly as it started to push through the upper atmosphere, the aerodynamic design keeping it stable as the low rumble swiftly gave way to a loud roaring, the internal temperature spiking steadily as the friction outside slowly conducted through the skin of the pod. The older generation of pods such as those the Autumn had been issued with before her refit had actually been designed to steadily ablate under the stress of atmospheric entry, so that by the time the pod reached the troposphere, much of the skin of the pod would have been burned away, allowing the chute and retrorockets to easily bring the much reduced mass to a safe landing. That system had worked well enough, except that it had led to a tendency to scatter ODS'T groups over a wide area thanks to the random aerodynamics, to say nothing of the -admittedly rare- occasions when too much of the skin had ablated too early and let the superheated friction induced air into the pod, consuming it and the helpless ODS'T inside.

These newer model pods were built with a solid skin that did not ablate. Heavier but more powerful breaking rockets compensated for the additional mass and made the pods safer to use, but more useful for Fred was the fact that they could be targeted to land in a very

tight grouping rather than being scattered all over the place, wasting much less time between boots hitting the ground and getting on with the mission. If the Covenant were already deploying in strength, they would need every second to delay them while the much larger ODSB battalion following on got set up to repel the enemy.

Presently, an alarm started to sound on his command board; and brought his attention away from the map of his four LZs. Glancing at his right hand status screen, he felt his stomach sink as he saw the flashing alert status that came up there.

****ALERT.**

>Unidentified Aircraft detected in Operational Zone.
Profile 89% Match for Covenant BANSHEE Type Fighter.
>Raid Count 20+

In a heartbeat, he linked the alert out over his TACCOM link to the other Spartans before opening up TAC-16, the Majors direct channel.

"This is Spartan Zero Zero Five, we have contact with twenty plus Covenant Banshees in the AO, repeat, enemy bandits are in the AO".

There was a pause, followed by a profanity from the Major back down the link, somewhat static filled from the ionization around the pod, but clear none the less.

"Hang on Zero Zero Five" she said, "I'm calling in the cavalry"

"Standing by" he muttered into the closed channel, wondering why the Major would ask him to stand by with the clock counting down like this. The bandits appeared to be at a modest altitude, none coming within twenty or so kilometres of the entrances to the underground generator complexes, or down into range of AAA, but they were clearly in a position to try and interdict any reinforcements on Reach from getting to the complex by air.

Clearly they had not anticipated a combat drop from space, and given the distances and speeds involved, his people should get down without interference...but if they reacted to their arrival and started looking up, moved to intercept the ODSBs following them in...

There was nothing he could do about that, and he was not going to waste his time fretting over things he could not change. The generator complex _had _to be defended at all costs.

Hitting the TEAMCOM and opening up the Spartan roster file on his HUD, he took a quick glance at the tactical map of their LZs, pleased to see that the circles showing their possible landing zones were continuing to contract at a steady rate, showing that all the pods were on target. The Big Horn River basin was familiar to every Spartan dropping to Reach; they had run countless training exercises through the area when they were younger and they knew every hill and gully through the heavily forested area like the back of their hand. It was ideal terrain for the Spartans to split up in and start picking off the Covenant's forces, especially with the cover of night to work with, and offered better odds than trying to meet them in a

defensive battle from a static position, and he kept those thoughts in his mind as he mentally reviewed his roster and made his deployments.

"Here's the plan" he said across the link, highlighting Isaac-039 and four other Spartans first, linking them into a fireteam designated Omega and shooting out the update across TEAMCOM. "Team Omega, drop on the generators directly. Meet up with the Marines on ground and prepare to receive wounded if the ODSs get hit on the way down. Get a secure SATCOM uplink established and break out the mortars; I have a feeling we're going to need them. Joshua" he continued, selecting his tag in the roster and moving him to a squad command slot, "you're in command of Bravo Team, you have Objective North, Will, Objective South with Gamma Team. Recon first, we need accurate intelligence on what we're facing before we can start to deal with it, but use your best judgment" he ordered as selected the remaining six Spartans into his own team designated Alpha. "Everyone else is with me in Alpha, we're heading for objective West. Questions?"

Blue lights flashed down the line almost at once. Very few UNSC units, even Special Forces units, could take such a minimal mission briefing and run with it like Spartans could, but if the ODSs got hammered on the way down, unconventional and flexible tactics may be all that stood between Reach falling and Reach holding. Closing his roster file, Fred returned his eyes to his master status displays and eyed the navigational subsystems as its 'countdown to landing' timer closed in on forty seconds. "Finalize your LZs and stand by to break formation on my mark..._mark!_"

With perfectly synchronized timing, the maneuvering thrusters on his pod fired with almost thirty others, the formation scattering across the night sky in a chaotic ballet as the massed formation separated into four distinct groups. Omega continued to drop straight down, but Alpha Bravo and Gamma were punted laterally to position themselves over their own LZs with a series of turns and burns that could make even the most hardened of ODSs lose their lunch. Moments after _that_, explosive bolts fired and released the pods drag chute, the cross shaped semi-rigid flap nowhere near big enough to bring the pod to a safe landing, but it was sufficient to correctly orient the HEV at its landing zone and ensure it hit right side up, the chute being cut loose moments later as the final descent thrusters ignited.

Fred clenched his teeth as the rockets fired. Not against the G-Forces, but against the knowledge that this was the most exposed part of a drop, the last twenty seconds. The descent rockets firing in a full 2G breaking burn would be illuminating his position like a giant searchlight to anyone with half decent IR gear, and any enemy scouts in the area would no doubt be relaying reports of their arrival as quickly as they could. His pods enhanced sensors showed no hostiles in the immediate LZ he and the six other pods of his team were going to land in, but he didn't kid himself that his descent had gone unobserved; his teams would need to form up and melt into the terrain quickly, before heavy forces were brought to bear.

Breathing deeply as the laser rangefinder went to double digits, he carefully braced, trying to ignore the voice in the back of his mind that wondered if someone had made a mistake with his brand new suit of armour when it had come to shock absorption-

**BANG**

The pod punched into the ground and halted with the force of a full stop at the end of a sentence, his body moving with the reflexes only a Spartan had to absorb the last of the momentum into his suits Hydrostatic Gel layer. Straightening, he yanked on the two yellow/black striped handles next to his head and the door of the pod was instantly blown away by explosive bolts, the cool night air of Reach flooding in as he twisted the quick release for his harness and leapt out into the darkness, snapping his M7 SMG up as he scanned the area, letting his motion sensor pulse out-

The scream of a Covenant Banshee passing overhead alerted him before the distant contact on his motion sensor was painted. Fred moved without thinking into a saw-tooth evasive pattern away from the pod, making for the cover of a thick grove of pine trees, expecting the flash of plasma fire or explosion of fuel rod cannons from the aircraft passing overhead to follow in seconds...

None came however, so he skidded to a halt in cover and looked skyward, quickly acquiring and zooming in on at least eight or nine of the Covenant light attack fighters. Not heading for him, nor for the heavily armoured Generator complex as he had hoped, but puling into hard power climbs with a flash of blue light from their auxiliary thruster pods, no doubt vectoring in on the incoming pods and the easy kills they represented after seeing his pod and others land moments ago.

At least until the Banshees suddenly wobbled and started to break off. Fred frowned in confusion as all cohesion collapsed in the enemy formation, two of them sidestepping into barrel rolls of all things-

-but it all became clear moments later as a quartet of missiles streaked across the night sky and obliterated four of the Covenant fighters instantly in massive golden explosions. A storm of tracer fire reached out for two other Banshees that had not broken their formation fast enough, one simply disintegrating under the impacts, the other losing a wing and going into a fatal flat spin that could only end one way.

Seconds later, the rest of the Banshees scattered as two larger aircraft thundered through the formation, the crack of a sonic boom rumbling through the forest as the pair of Saber class fighters streaked overhead, the two UNSC fighters maintaining a perfect formation as they pulled up into a climbing turn before separating, each selecting a target like a hawk preparing to dive on a scattering flock of geese, and thundering down in pursuit.

Fred sighed in relief as Major Dares cavalry arrived in the nick of time, hurrying back to his pod as it ticked and cooled in the night air, hurriedly stripping it of the field gear stored inside. He loaded up on every scrap of ammo he could for the MA5B he took from the weapons rack, as well as a couple of extra magazines for his SMG, knowing he wouldn't get a chance to resupply anytime soon. He also took a number of grenades that he was sure he could find a use for, before moving out for the tree line as the paired Sabers passed over at low altitude, this time directly over his position.

"Red leader, Noble leader, you still alive down there?"

He paused, surprised at the voice before shaking it off and switching over to the general Navy frequency, breaking radio silence on a secure mode that would record his transmissions in full before compressing them and squirting them out in millisecond long bursts, making it far more difficult to detect and pinpoint his location in case the Covenant were listening.

"Noble Leader, Red Leader, still here Commander. Thanks for the air cover"

"Cortana asked if we wouldn't mind diverting before heading upstairs to join the fleet" the Spartan-III replied as the Sabers came around, two more of the prototypes reforming with them into a tight formation. "I take it Red Flag has been scrubbed?"

"Just delayed" Fred replied briefly, not willing to talk about a mission so heavily classified, even over what was supposed to be a secure channel and annoyed that the much younger Spartan had done so without thinking. "Is Commander Catherine with you?" he continued the conversation in another direction, moving out smoothly from the pod at a pace that he considered brisk, but other infantry would probably consider a flat out sprint.

"He'd get lost otherwise" a new female voice joined the channel, the sarcastic comment about her superior hiding what Fred knew to be a bond as tight as any the Spartan II's. "What can I do for you Red Leader?"

"Our target LZ is approximately five kilometres West of my position but we have no eyes on it" Fred replied as he halted, scanning the forest before choosing a path that would give him the best blend of speed and control. "Cortana has no clear evidence that it even exists, but I agree with her reasoning of something being here, can _you_ make out anything from up there?"

"Checking" the other Spartan answered, the line going dead for a few seconds before she came back with a tone of confusion in her voice. "Odd. Standard sweep shows nothing ... but if I tinker with the passive high frequency EM readouts and look at the raw data I would swear that there's ... I don't know, something? I can't pin it down, it could be nothing, it could be an incredibly subtle ECM field and when I look out the window I don't _see_ _anything_ ... nothing at all in fact, just trees and more trees".

Nothing? Fred frowned as he followed a dry creek bed that eventually fed into one of the tributaries of the Big Horn River, the foliage along the sides giving him good cover as he moved forward, managing somehow to avoid pointing out that _something_ had to be there to generate that much ECM. Catherine-B320 was an electronics expert who knew her stuff better than most, and if she said there was probably something there, there was probably something there. But even as dense as the forest canopy was, not seeing _any_ signs of hostiles...

"Sorry we couldn't be any more help Red Leader" Carter broke back in. "And much as I would love to stay around and strafe some Grunts, Holland is ordering us upstairs. He thinks that we should back up the fleet's fighter units since we seem to have, uh, 'borrowed' these prototypes anyway. Sky looks clear, we'll see you when you get back home. Out"

Fred tactfully let the statement about how they had acquired four top-secret UNSC prototypes pass without comment as the quartet of fighters lit their thrusters and pulled for orbit. As a Special Action unit of SpecOpp Command Group Three, Noble had been given their Naval ranks mostly to let them pull rank when needed, an idea that had been suggested as complementary of their strengths in improvisation and adaptation, as opposed to the older and more experienced Spartan-IIs who behaved strictly according to mission protocols and the chain of command.

Frankly, they reminded him somewhat of Adriana, Jai and Mike; the 'Grey Team' of Spartan-IIs, who had never really fit in with the tightly knit group of the rest of them, so much so that they had eventually been siphoned off into their own unit to cause chaos in their own way, and as far as he knew since their last report two years ago, they were still out there deep in Covenant controlled space hitting vulnerable targets of opportunity when and where they could.

But even so, Grey Team had never made him uneasy in quite the same way as the Spartan IIIs did, and not simply because they were a new 'class' of Spartans. The Spartan II's had always hoped - and even expected - that more Spartans would follow in their footsteps, however Doctor Catherine Halsey, the genius behind the program, had decided that no more Spartan II's were to be trained after the first class 'graduated', citing a lack of acceptably screened candidates. She had flatly refused to compromise on her most stringent guidelines for recruitment, and frankly Fred could understand why. While the original Spartan I soldiers had apparently been normal - albeit elite - soldiers who had undergone modest biological and biochemical 'tinkering' to push them to new heights of excellence for counter-insurgency and covert operations, the Spartan II program had involved extensive biochemical, surgical and cybernetic work on young Children just entering puberty to allow a child to 'grow' into a super soldier vastly beyond the capabilities of any 'tweaked' adult...but not without risk.

Fred would never, could never forget the faces of every one of his Brothers and Sisters who had 'failed' their augmentation procedures, the lucky ones dying on the operating table. He perfectly remembered the incredible pain himself, and even after decades of combat service and more than his share of Purple Heats, he had never experienced anything like it ever again, a fact he was quietly thankful for. And because of the barely forty percent success rate of the augmentations, even with handpicked candidates, Doctor Halsey had terminated any future augmentation and training programs.

However, ONI had apparently had other ideas.

From a strictly military point of view, Fred could appreciate the logic behind the Spartan III program when Doctor Halsey had explained it to him and the rest of the Spartan IIs a few months back. ONI had, somehow, made the advances Doctor Halsey had ceased trying to make, boosting the success rate of a simpler Augmentation process to almost one hundred percent. The idea of mass producing Spartans did have an appeal to him, but he knew that was in the context of his military career, where a Spartan II Commando was the most potent soldier in the UN Military. A decade of intense training in a tightly knit group, combined with their augmentations and decades of field

experience made them incredibly potent, even before you matched them with their MJOLNIR armour technology, at which point a single Spartan II became a weapon able to take on the most dangerous missions, accomplish the objectives and get back out again in one piece.

But such abilities came at a cost. The raw financial cost of building and maintaining the MJOLNIR suits alone for the 30 active Spartan II's would have been enough to buy the UNSC Fleet a shiny new _Marathon_ class Cruiser every financial year, but that was nothing compared to the _time_ it took to properly train and resource Spartan candidates to Spartan II levels, time Earth simply didn't have.

So, the Beta-5 Division of ONI Section III had turned the idea on its head. Instead of a limited number of the best equipped and perfectly trained soldiers, they would look to mass produce 'good enough' Spartans. Spartans that were still a huge step beyond other Special Forces soldiers such as ODS'Ts, but both only a fraction of the cost and ready in a fraction of the time of the Spartan IIs, designed quite deliberately for a series of very specific missions. ONI prowlers had been deployed to back trace the Covenant's line of advance through the Orion Arm during the early years of the war in an almost futile search for their Homeworlds, as the well known maxim that the best offense was a good defence held true even in long range space warfare. The UNSC's inferior FTL technology had quickly made clear that any notion of taking the offensive against the Covenant's core worlds was a long shot at best given the suspected distances involved, but even with their superior FTL technology, the Covenant war was fought at the end of quite a long logistical chain. Flag Officers in the UNSC went to sleep many a night with dreams of smashing the logistical bases the Covenant had set up on the edge of UNSC space for some time, in the hope that it would slow the Covenant down, buy the breathing room Earth needed desperately after Admiral Cole's counter offensive had reached its limit and stalled out.

But it had remained a dream. The distances involved, time it would take, level of force that would need to be committed and perhaps even lost against damage done...none of the simulations were promising. What was needed was a weapon that was powerful enough to be used against those otherwise untouchable enemy targets. One that could be replaced or renewed after being used, yet one that would not weaken the UNSC units holding the line against the Covenant that were already outgunned and outnumbered.

The ultimate answer to the conundrum was to be the Spartan III Program.

With the ability to augment hundreds of otherwise normal children almost at will thanks to the perfected augmentation procedures, the Beta-5 Division had gotten to work building a 'black' private army when it became clear from subtle profiling that Catherine Halsey would never play ball with them. 'Recruited' from among the large ranks of war orphaned children who would never be missed, the best ONI indoctrination specialists and military Trainers had gone to work, putting eight and nine year olds through a boot camp comparable to what ODS'Ts were put through, focused on covert infiltration and sabotage. In parallel, they were augmented to Spartan Level status, their enhanced abilities more than offsetting their lack of field experience and ultimately giving ONI an army of fanatically loyal soldiers 'bred' for but a single purpose; to launch deep strike missions into Covenant space, targeted against key strategic

installations of the enemy. Once the standard UNSC requirements for personnel survival and retrieval had been taken out the equation, the success probability of these missions skyrocketed to above 90% and without any end in sight to new Spartan candidates being 'recruited', it was truly a renewable resource, the perfect weapons system...

...so long of course, that you had no moral objection to an endless cycle of abducting orphaned children, indoctrinating them, modifying them and finally sending them to die in deep space, unknown and unheard of, before they were even old enough to start high school.

Fred couldn't remember his own family, not outside of some half real and half probably made up images in the back of his mind. He knew that he had been taken from them and turned into a Spartan, all of the Spartan II soldiers knew it, remembered some part of it, either in the disorientation when arriving on Reach or even some scattered memories of their former lives. It was uncomfortable to all of them to think about such things, the soldiers preferring to think only of the tightly knit pseudo family they had formed, instead taking comfort and drawing strength from the knowledge that they were making a difference to something far greater than themselves, fighting to save all of humanity including those they had left behind long ago from the most terrible enemy it had ever faced. And even if their 'recruitment' had been rather morally dubious, they retained some levels of legal resource should they want 'out', even if only Maria-062 had ever used it, and even then only to move off active duty to a supporting R&D role on Earth.

No such option had been given to the Spartan-IIIs. They were disposable weapons, nothing more or less. They had no legal protections, no acknowledgments of their rights as human beings, no 'out' ...

At least not until the day the program had been blown wide open.

Exactly how it had had happened was still the subject of at least three different investigations between ONI, Fleet Criminal Investigative Services and a UNA CID team crosschecking at HIGHCOM's insistence, but it had started when a furious Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb had stormed into Admiral Terrance Hoods office in 'The Hive', and slammed a data stick that he had found mysteriously sitting on his desk into the computer terminal of the de-facto ruler of the UNSC and bluntly demanded of his superior if he had any idea about 'this travesty'.

Lord Hood had been just as shocked, even if he was rather better at controlling his reaction than his notoriously emotional Texan subordinate. While both of the Naval officers may have privately understood and perhaps even acknowledged the value of the Spartan III programs achievements no matter how appalled personally they may have felt at its methods, it was the stark proof that ONI had been playing its own little game for years outside the military chain of command that had finally crossed the line Section-III had been dancing back and forth over for many years now. It had long been known that ONI had been siphoning off funding and resources for its own operations, but included on the data files was extensive evidence on just how much they had drained, and the amounts were

_staggering, _far beyond what any of the most paranoid HIGHCOM people would have ever suspected.

Calling a meeting of his senior staff minus those he knew to be in ONI's back pocket - who were promptly sent off on urgent but entirely reasonable errands for a day or two - Hood had presented the information and called for comments.

No-one had spoken for many long seconds, staring at the green data chip on Hoods oak desk as if it was a nuclear weapon on a deadman switch. Left unsaid but understood by everyone in the room, was the fact that someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get it to HIGHCOM, someone who clearly did _not_ _approve of the Spartan III Project given that it accounted for most of the data on it.

Yet the presence of the chip was only half the message. The _other_ _half was the fact that whoever had put it there could clearly make another copy and put it somewhere else. And for all of ONI Section II's efforts to control the media, everyone knew that the truth had a way of getting out if someone really wanted it to do so, especially someone on the 'inside' of the power games still played in the UNSC.

And if news of the Spartan III Program went public...

The Spartans had been carefully worked by ONI Section II propaganda people into the heroes of the UNSC; paragons of everything that the UNSC stood for and the lowest soldier could look up to as a morale boost when in the darkest of nights. The fact that they had originally been intended to be wielded as a scalpel against humans trying to break away from the UNSC was a rather carefully suppressed fact, even today, for the very good reason that even years after the last real conflict against the insurrectionists, the legacy of that war remained in twitchy ceasefires and fragile alliances that held only in the face of humanity's common enemy.

But if the Spartan III program and the truth about it got out...

At the very _least_, morale would crash across the board for the entire defence force as soldiers came to grips with a betrayal of everything the Spartans had been said to stand for. Fighting to defend Earth only to find it had been kidnapping and augmenting ten year olds for suicide missions for decades? Soldiers who had family of their own knowing that their 'Government' had no problem using their children as disposable weapons, the ultimate 'Smart Bomb' as it were?

The remaining outer colonies untouched on the far side of the UNSC from the Covenants invasion vector would almost certainly go insane over the news. That children, children whose parents had often willingly sacrificed their lives to ensure their kids had made it to the comparative safety of the Inner Colonies had been used as disposable weapons...

The Insurrectionist propaganda about the UNSC largely dismissed as ludicrous by most people would no doubt return in full force, and _this_ time many people might actually start to _believe_ it.

And the Inner Colonies? The very real danger of a fragmentation of the UNSC as worlds broke away and started to look to their own

defence, wondering why they were sacrificing everything to defend a state that could so betray the most vulnerable of its people like that, could hardly be discounted either.

In short, this single little black operation could shatter the unity of Earth completely and irrevocably.

But equally left unsaid by the officers as they stared at the data chip quietly sitting on the desk, was the statement that someone wanted this dealt with quietly, not in the public arena, someone who knew the risks of this play. And worst of all to the assembled group, was the conclusion that this might well be only the tip of the iceberg; that there could be a whole lot more skeletons in ONI's closet just waiting to come out at the worst possible time.

Although the Admirals and Generals had entertained themselves with the idea of seizing the Point of No Return, arresting Vice Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky along with her key Lieutenants and turning ONI upside down to see what 'interesting things' came crashing down to the deck, cooler heads had prevailed.

For one thing, the evidence suggested most of ONI was still perfectly loyal, it was just the dark, hidden and compartmentalized mess of Section III that problematic. Not to mention the fact that with the Covenant pushing deeper through the outer and Inner Colonies, humanity could not afford to be at war with itself and every weapon, no matter how distasteful it may be or how wasteful it was to build it in the first place, needed to be considered.

Instead, a quick, efficient purge of the 'core' of Section III and its theoretical watchdog 'Section 0' had taken place, quietly. Well executed, ultimately less than thirty senior officers in ONI including Margaret Parangosky had been 'promoted' to other locations in the fleet outside of ONI, or 'retired' to head up major military industrial projects back in the inner colonies where carefully chosen 'watchdogs' could keep an eye on them. Handpicked 'loyalists' from Sections I, II and III and from the wider fleet itself had moved in smoothly to keep things running and ensure a minimum of operational disruption, even as ONI's hidden compartments were flung open to let light in and see exactly what they were hiding from their nominal commanders.

Some, such as the NOVA bomb project had been all but leapt on by the line military, Vice Admiral Whitcomb's joy at such awesome destructive potential that might just even up the battles in space just barely outweighing his fury that the project had been kept 'black' for so long, with a fraction of the resources it warranted being spent on it.

Other compartments such as the Spartan III Program had been dealt with by the simple expedient of transferring the entire Beta-5 Division to Reach. Full Command Authority for evaluations had been transferred to Whitcomb, who in turn passed the football on to Catherine Halsey with simple orders to find the best way to integrate the new Spartans with the Spartan II's, even as he terminated any future 'recruitment' and augmentations.

Fred had been on Reach that day a few months ago along with all of the Spartan II's still on active duty - save Grey Team busy bringing

their own special brand of chaos to Covenant controlled UNSC space, when the Spartan IIIs had arrived. It had been an almost surreal moment watching from inside ONI's SWORD Base as the Spartan IIIs walked off their dropships looking as little more than a bunch of children to the much older commandos, despite their blatant augmentation work that made them all look like Olympic athletes. They were clearly Spartans...but they also _weren't_ Spartans. They were almost family...and yet almost as alien as the Covenant.

Kelly, who had never been the best at concealing her body language, had shuffled from one foot to the other in a way that spoke volumes of how uneasy these other Spartans had made her feel, an attitude that was clearly felt by everyone else in the room to lesser or greater extents.

Well, except _him _of course.

The Master Chief had taken in the situation with the stoic and impassive manner he always held himself in - even when outside of his power armour and among the tightly knit group of Spartans; simply observing and studying the new arrivals from the distant and still incredibly classified Onyx training grounds with a professional eye as their DIs tried to get them into ranks to march them downstairs.

But just as he had been about to turn away from the parade ground, two other figures had stepped off the final drop ship-

Fred skidded a halt as he almost stumbled over a dead tree branch, incredibly annoyed with himself for letting his attention wander. He was in a _combat zone_, not the mess. He forced himself to stop moving and count to five, letting the distracted mess of thoughts that had crashed into his mind with Noble teams appearance fade and flow out. He was _in command, _the Master Chief had _trusted _him with the fate of almost all of the active Spartan IIs, and here he was letting his focus drift...

The forest was pitch black under both a night sky and a double canopy, but that was no impediment for a Spartan. His retina modifications worked together with a subtle light filter in his armours visor to concentrate light, letting him see his way without any active visual or IR illumination systems as he made his way to the chosen RP; an old hiding place of the Spartans that all of them knew well from many days of evading CPO Mendez and his instructors in field exercises. Nocturnal animals reacted in a startled fashion as he moved swiftly through their part of the forest with a surprisingly light foot, sending a flock of Moa fleeing through the undergrowth here and earning a flat glare from a distant pack of Gã°ta as he skirted their zone of ownership there, but none were annoyed - or brave- enough to try and challenge him as he moved on. Birds in the trees made their mating calls as they always did, none aware that their entire species had just been put on the endangered list by the appearance of a Covenant fleet bent on planetary destruction, and Fred suppressed a flash of anger at that fact, as the memories of many years living on this planet flooded back into him from the sights and sounds as he swiftly moved on.

Halting on the crest of a rise that would lead him down to the Rally Point, he scanned his sectors carefully, looking for any sign of hostiles or his fellow Spartans...and found neither. The later didn't

surprise him, every Spartan here knew this area like the back of their hands and if needed, every one of them could move like ghosts through it. The lack of Covenant forces however...was odd. Their RP was off the direct line between the Generators and the enemy LZ of course, but it was close enough that they should at least have seen SOME elements of enemy forces by now, flank security at the very least.

But there was nothing, not even the rustle and activity of disturbed animals that would eventuate if Elite Commandos had tried to move through the underbrush while cloaked.

Keeping his eyes and especially his ears open, he eased over the slight rise in the floor of the forest that marked the start of the long, shallow descent to the river basin and the river itself, working off memory as much as visuals as he moved across and down into a narrow defile all but invisible if you didn't know it was there, twisting and turning until it opened up halfway down into an overhang...under which five Spartans waited hidden in cover, all tracking him with their weapons before snapping them down as he snapped his own aim point down.

Five Spartans. Not six.

"SITREP" he said quickly.

"Sir, Anton checked in several minutes ago, he's holding five hundred meters west on point" Kelly was predictably the first to get a word in, explaining where the missing Spartan was. One of their best scouts, Anton excelled in moving without being seen over almost any kind of terrain. It was unsurprising that he had moved out to provide early warning of any enemy movement in on their RP and satisfied with the explanation, Fred nodded at Kelly to continue her report. "We're all one hundred percent, none of us have had contact with the enemy"

"Me either" Fred admitted, and he saw the subtle edge of confusion pass through the assembled Spartans at his admission, no doubt they had expected he had been a full minute behind schedule because he had needed to detour around enemy units, something ironically that would have made them happier than this utter lack of activity. "But we can't sit around wondering, the Covenant are up to something and we need to figure it out. Jospheh, you're on point. Grace, Li, Malcom, Kelly, staggered line, I'll bring up the rear. Silencers on and radio silence from this point, let's get moving".

The Spartans acknowledgment lights flashed blue before the group killed their IFF Transponders and snapped/screwed silencers onto their weapons. That done, the team moved out from their ancient hiding place, Fred taking a final look around before turning his back and following his team as they hurried out into the darkness.

**0608 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>Orbital Defence Generator Facility A-331, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System

Brevet Major Veronica Dare was not a happy woman.

For her, happiness came about from a well executed operation where planning and preparation eliminated surprises or 'snags' for her

side, maximized them for the enemy, and let her get in, accomplish her mission, and get out with acceptable losses in manpower and equipment.

As such, the fact that this mission was shaping up to be an ad-hoc disaster in the making that would only be salvaged by rapid decision making and reacting rather than preparing, was not something particularly calculated to please her. However, standing in the cool night air of Reach with her helmet off, she showed none of this to her subordinates. Instead she looked the picture perfect image of an ODSST recruitment poster, a rather attractive woman even carrying enough firepower to take on a platoon of Grunts, ignoring the speculative looks more than a few of her soldiers sent her way when they thought she wasn't looking, in favour of slowly panning her ONI issue field glasses across the valley in front of her.

The main entrance to the generator complex was set in forested foothills, pressed up against a cliff that rose sharply into the sky and through the low cloud cover and eventually formed a part of the Highland Mountains that ran North to South down the spine of the continent. The entrance itself was set back inside a cave dug a hundred meters back inside the wall of the cliff itself, an access road wide enough to let two M312 recovery vehicles move side by side by side extending a kilometre down the foothills to the valley floor before turning Northwest and heading out of sight towards the only highway in this part of Reach. A double chain link fence defining a radius of three hundred meters from the opening to the cave secured the area from intruders encompassing various ancillary and administration buildings, although Veronica was not counting on the waves of Covenant troops inbound to respect the large red 'UNSC PERSONNEL ONLY' and 'TRESSPASSERS CAN BE SHOT ON SIGHT' signs placed along the fence.

Still, from a defenders point of view she could have had worse to work with, even if she hated static defence work. The entrance set on top of the foothills gave her a commanding view of the surrounding countryside, and the engineers who had built the place had at least had the sense to level out and clear the slopes down to the floor of the valley to provide very little cover between the tree line and perimeter fence, something she intended to ruthlessly exploit. Teams of ODSSTs and regular Marines from Charlie Company crawled over the hill now, hard at work under the guidance of her Combat Engineers as they fortified their position with what they could, mostly setting up new sandbagged emplacements around instacrete bunkers and fortifications that had been installed a few days ago as per WINTER CONTINGENCY standing orders in the event of a Covenant attack. And even though most of the troops at this facility had been reassigned to the bloody counter attacks across the rest of the Viery territory, she had been pleasantly surprised to find much of their excess weapons, ammo and equipment had been left behind, letting her set up a far more formidable defence then she otherwise could have managed.

Most of her people were tied up adding what they could to the fortifications in the time they had left, some stringing out razorwire on Mongoose ATVs at choice locations, others busy on a handful of Warthogs from the facilities motor pool sowing their limited number of Lotus and Antlion mines to thin out any massed attack before it really started, while yet others finished stripping the last of the HEV pods littering the valley floor of any useful

equipment, humping it back up the hill as fast as they could.

Although she was in nominally in charge of all this, the activity was really being overseen by Wellesley; the AI having been removed from her HEV and installed in her command post shortly after she had landed. Annoying as the AI could sometimes be, she couldn't fault his organizational and multitasking skills as he oversaw the reinforcement of the defences with great precision, logging and updating supplies against the units TO&E and keeping her informed of the battle going on upstairs in her spare time. As annoying as AI's like Wellesley could be, they were absolutely essential to the smooth functioning of ODSB Battalions, moreso than regular Marine or even Army units. Unlike other such formations that generally dedicated one or more companies to support and logistics work, ODSB units got by with a short company of specialists and far more cross training of the rest of the unit that let ad-hoc organization be done on the fly. Being dropped behind the lines with no logistical support or supplies beyond what they could shove into their pods, their 'teeth to tail' ratio was by necessity much higher than similar sized formations in the corps or Army, they simply couldn't afford to have anything but the bare minimum of non-combat personnel, delegating most of the communications, intelligence, fire support and logistics work to an AI to free up every rifle that might be needed to tip the balance of any engagement.

And, at least so far, the theory appeared to be holding, her ad-hoc command coming together well under the pressure of the situation, working as smoothly and efficiently as if they had been together for a year instead of a month.

Now, if this cohesion would hold together in combat...well, that was her job, wasn't it?

"Major, I have just received word from Captain McKay; her sniper/spotter teams are in position and report no contact. Fortification work is well ahead of schedule and should be finished within three minutes" her omnipresent AI broke into her thoughts at that moment, as she panned her binoculars across the distant tree line, his voice being relayed through her spook issue neural lace rather than the helmet dangling against her chest plate.

"Thank you Wellesley" she replied back absently as she increased her magnification and looked straight out to the West. The reports from the distant Spartan teams were as confusing as they were concerning. North and South the Spartans had reported contact with the enemy, and were in the process of trying to localize the main enemy LZs. She had given each team direct call on two of her Shortsword bombers each, between them and their own unique talents, she was confident they would eliminate the enemy staging grounds and hopefully any command assets holding back there, making her job somewhat easier. But out West...

She mulled on the brief report Fredrick-104 had sent a few minutes ago before going to radio silence. Something was up, she could _feel_ it in her bones. The Covenants tactics all through this campaign had been unusually cantered around misdirection; having everyone look one way while sneaking around the other. The initial infiltration force that had hit all over the planet without any apparent pattern or purpose for days, staging from a cloaked Supercarrier? The Covenant

sacrificing a hundred ships as little more than a diversion to get a new wave of ground forces down, rather than press an all out attack as they always did?

And now, while two of their landing zones near the generators were active with troops and moving out to attack in force, the third was silent, without anything really more substantial than guess work to show it existed?

For probably the third time in as many minutes, she shook off her thoughts and let the binoculars hang loose, reaching down and retrieving her helmet, which like most of her gear was enhanced ONI issue rather than standard ODS, and replaced it on her head as she jumped down from the top of the storage building she had been using as an observation post, just outside the cave.

"If I may say Major" her AI continued moments later, "you appear to be somewhat distracted".

"Well we just made a combat drop onto Reach to hold the generators against an overwhelming Covenant force, why would I be distracted exactly Wellesley?" she replied back with cheerfully sarcastic tone as she walked towards the back of the cave and the CP they had set up in a security office fifty meters inside the blast doors, her bodyguard fire team -Sergeant Buck's former squad that he had 'insisted' needed to follow her everywhere per UNSC regulations-falling into step around her as she moved past the inner perimeter. She returned the nods of her troops who she was pleased to see didn't salute her, lest some Jackal sulking somewhere with a Beam Rifle decide she was worth a shot, but they did at least acknowledge her as she moved past them with her bodyguards in tow, a gift from her senior NCO that was a gesture of the frankest trust given that his men and his personal squad were the closest thing he had to family these days.

Of course, she had heard their 'secure' complaining about sitting back in the HQ platoon when battle was getting increasingly close, such 'support' work even more loathed than usual in ODS units given both the deliberate de-emphasis of them and the fact that by in large Marines didn't sign up to the ODSs to sit in the rear doing 'paperwork'.

But none the less, she knew their records and knew that she couldn't ask for better for a close protection detail.

"The calm before the battle is often trying on even the most combat experienced officers" the AI continued after a short pause to no doubt analyse her voice and biometrics and adjust his response accordingly. "At Waterloo for example-"

"You were never at Waterloo Wellesley" she pointed out with a roll of her eyes. As incredibly useful as he was in his areas of expertise, Wellesley was a 'Dumb AI', vastly less adaptable and flexible than a top grade Smart AI like Cortana, with a correspondingly less sophisticated personality. He had in fact been programmed based off the personality of Arthur Wellesley, the legendary First Duke of Wellington, and he was forever trying to compare situations to some of the more famous historical battles Wellington had fought in. "And when I want your opinion, I will give it to you. Now, have you had any luck getting orbital surveillance for me? Or Artillery? This is

the most important piece of real estate on the entire planet, we should damn well have first call on _everything _down here!"

"Bad times I'm afraid" the AI replied as she passed through a smaller side door set next to the main blast doors and turned into the twisting passageways that passed various small storage rooms and officers, before reaching the stairwell that would get her back into the tunnel behind the blast doors and across to the far side, where the security office she had taken over for her CP was set. "I am afraid what satellites remain operational are out of position right now, the orbital grid has taken significant attrition over the past few hours. As for your fire support, since the Covenant hit FLEETCOM HQ, the chain of command down here has become a right bloody mess. I can't find any intact divisional command structures that _have _heavy guns, let alone could make it to us before the fighting starts".

"Great" she snarled, yet again cursing the de-emphasis on heavy organic fire support attached to ground units. Always the damn navy insisting that their ships could provide vastly more powerful 'Ortillary' on demand from orbit or even directly in attendance in atmosphere. It was the core of the light air-mobile doctrine that dominated the Corps thinking, using Pelicans to move infantry with light vehicle and light armour support around, relying almost entirely on Archer and MAC strikes from orbit to 'crack' any tough nuts on the way.

Unless of course the Covenant just so happened to bring in their own ships to contest space.

As they _always_ did.

Or set up heavy AAA batteries in their AO.

As they _always_ did_.

Or just plain had their _own _capital ships in-atmosphere, as the UNSC _Grafton _had found out during the final push against the Covenant ground forces yesterday when the enemy Supercarrier had decloaked...

She guessed that _somed_ay the fleet and Navy brass in charge of the UNSC would see the flaws in their logic, but it was clearly not going to be today.

"At least tell me that you were able to scrounge up some more air support since the Admiral stole my Sabers?"

"No joy there either I'm afraid" the AI said, actually managing to sound apologetic for once. "Everything that could fly down here was torn up badly in the push against the Solace and her fighters, they all but wiped each other out and whatever is left is down for repairs. Everything space capable is being thrown into holding the line upstairs-"

"Then get on the _horn _to the _Trafalgar_ and point out that a flight of Longswords are _not_ going to kill a Covenant cruiser, but they _might_ just keep the guns that _will _kill said cruiser alive, if they get down here ASAP!"

"I am trying to do so" the other pointed out mildly without missing a beat, indifferent as always to her annoyance as he kept working patiently at the various problems - one of the often overlooked benefits of having an AI doing all this work in place of a human who might protest being used as a punching bag. "Some good news though; the remote sensors the Spartans have placed are now linked in - we have full coverage along the perimeter. And your engineers are just putting the final touches on their two ARGUS drones, which should be ready for launch in the next few minutes, I didn't think a human could assemble them this fast to be honest".

"Well now you know better" Veronica replied, somehow glad to see the AI tripped up and prove the damn thing didn't know everything as she moved out of the corridors to cross the massive sloped tunnel that wound down like a helix to the generators far below, and halt in front of the reinforced door to the security office that she had taken over as her command post, patiently waiting as Romeo hammered the 'OPEN' key with little success, before trying instead of hammer his first on the door itself.

"Hey, open up already" he demanded.

"Password please" a muffled voice came back through the thick door, causing the smart mouthed NCO's jaw to drop, the man probably wishing he had his helmet on as he glanced back at his CO and the three other ODSs with blank visors simply staring at him before he looked back.

"You've _got _to be kidding me" he muttered before turning back to the door. "WHAT password?" he demanded.

"The password so we don't open the door for Elites" the other shot back in an astonishingly calm voice. Veronica thought about simply triggering her communications link to the senior officers inside, but instead found herself having far too much fun simply staring at the smartass Lance Corporal like a senior officer who was expecting him to solve the problem in the next ten seconds or find there would be hell to pay, especially given that the meeting wasn't scheduled to start for another minute yet.

Romeo worked his jaw and turned back to the door, an incredulous look on his face.

"Do I _sound _like an Elite to you?"

"Well ... you could be held _prisoner _by Elites" the other voice pointed out reasonably.

Romeo twitched.

"If I _was _being held prisoner by Elites and knew the password" he pointed out in a voice of slightly forced calm, "then they could just force me to tell _you _the password and you'd open the door for them!"

There was a pause of several seconds as everyone involved tilted their head slightly and worked through the logic of the statement, before the other voice came back again. "Well now I'm _definitely _not going to open the door for you!"

"Should we tell him?" one of the ODSTs behind her asked another, the upgraded sensors in her ONI-issue helmet picking up the tight beam communication between Corporal Taylor Dutch Miles and PFC Michael "Mickey" Crespo automatically and letting her listen in.

"Nah, it's more fun this way" the senior NCO said, clearly enjoying the squads smartass making an idiot of himself in front of their CO.

"Just open the damn door, we need to get inside for the staff meeting, the Major is out here!" the Lance Corporal tried.

There was a pause. "Does _she_ know the Password?"

"Okay that's it" Romeo snarled, although exactly what he was about to do given that the blast door would shrug off his boot or his rifle was unclear, but he was saved from making more of a fool of himself as the final member of the squad stepped forward, some Rookie that had only just transferred into the squad ... and she couldn't for the life of her remember his name.

"The password is Ezhtergom" the ODST said firmly.

There was a pause and then the door unlocked and retracted smoothly, a Marine on the far side lowering an imposing M90 shotgun from behind an improvised barricade of instacrete as Romeo turned slowly to face the ODST, a junior NCO who had just been transferred into the squad before RED FLAG, although his name escaped her right now.

"How in the hell did you know that?" Romeo demanded suspiciously of the other.

"Because the Lance Corporal, unlike yourself, actually read the daily report with the code of the day as regulations demands you should" Dare pointed out sweetly, stepping past the humiliated ODST and into the room. "Stay out here, this won't take long" she added to the Rookie as she entered the room, a pair of distant explosions one after the other causing everyone in the tunnel to look around for a few seconds before getting back to work even faster as the slightest rumble passed through the ground under them, Dare pausing as she studied two data bursts from Bravo and Gamma teams on her HUD, smiling slightly as she read them. "And stay alert. That was the Spartans blowing up the Covenants Northern and Southern LZ's" she continued, "and if they weren't pissed off before, they sure will be now".

**0616 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>Alpha Team AO, Orbital Defence Generator Facility A-331, Reach,
Epsilon Eridani System

Fred was not a happy man right now.

It was not _entirely_ UNSC propaganda that Spartans were inhuman killing machines who didn't get happy, didn't get sad, but just lived for the pleasure of killing Covenant troops. While it wasn't true to say that they were at all unemotional in their duties, their training and tightly knit bonds simply meant that in combat where most other UNSC personnel saw them, they acted with calm detachment and utter professionalism even in the worst of situations ... and as that was the only place you would generally _find_ a Spartan, it had led to a

perception that even when all hell was breaking loose, they were as calm as an English Duchess serving high tea to well bred guests.

But under their armour they were human. Decades of war had forged the tightest bond between each of the Spartans but had equally excluded most everyone else from that circle. Instead, they interacted with other military personnel with an almost detached level of professionalism, utterly correct in all manners of protocol yet distant in some odd way that many people found off putting at first...but they did feel every emotion any other human felt. And right now, Fred was feeling several in spades, mostly centred around frustration.

He and his people were only a few of kilometres from the suspected Covenant LZ and as yet they hadn't seen so much as a sleeping grunt. The twin explosions he had heard a few minutes ago almost simultaneously from the North and South could only have been Bravo and Gamma teams launching a timed strike against the enemy LZs, cutting their ability to fall back to space and hopefully destroying a great many of their troops and/or supplies. No doubt the teams were backtracking along the Covenants advance now, preparing to launch attacks on their rear as the main enemy force attacked the ODSs in front, catching them between the hammer and the anvil, although it was odd that they hadn't shot him a burst transmission reporting their success, but as they could easily be maintaining radio silence like he was, he was not concerned.

A lesser soldier would have been tempted to abort the recon mission and return to the base, come up on either Covenant pincer from their flank and start doing damage given the lack of evidence of a presence on this flank; they were only out here because Cortana suspected the Covenant had landed after all, not because she had proof.

But Fred was hardly a 'lesser' soldier, and so he continued his recon mission with the same due diligence as always. The Spartans were covering ground far faster than any other special forces team possibly could, yet they were as invisible in the gloom of the forest as any forest creature, their dark green armour blending seamlessly into the night as they moved through the darkness. He had made a judgment call to move their track up to run parallel to the most logical path between the Generator entrance and Covenant Landing Zone, a slight depression roughly two hundred meters wide that cut almost straight West to East uphill towards the Mountains, terminating at the final heavily forested ridgeline, over which the valley that contained the Generator entrance sat. It was the most logical route any Covenant force would take, with only shrubs and thick grasses in their way instead of trees and boulders, and he had hoped that by moving closer they would get eyes on the enemy. And while it still looked perfectly quiet and peaceful, he refused to let down his guard, knowing that to get sloppy in any way would be to set the worst kind of example in front of his team. Meaning that when Anton snapped his fist up, every Spartan froze dead still in half a second flat.

A flurry of subtle hand signals passed up and down the line, the Spartans shifting from their column formation into a line covering over a hundred meters as Fred moved up next to Anton, scanning every sector as he went, while Kelly fell back to the rear guard position. He couldn't see anything, but if Anton had, that was more than enough for him to move with utter caution.

Easing onto his stomach, he crawled the last few meters up to Anton, who was sheltering behind a fallen tree, his gaze edged over the top. He took an excruciatingly careful look himself...and saw nothing at all.

"What is it?" he asked quickly, his voice being recorded and then rebroadcast a digital burst of ultrasonic sound well outside the range of the hearing of humans or any known Covenant species, the time lag for recording and playback slightly frustrating, but better than the risk of COM chatter being intercepted or an alert sentry hearing them.

"One o'clock, two hundred meters, what do you see?" the other asked. Fred turned towards the area the foliage started to thin out and give way to the depression, very carefully studying with full zoom on his visor...and still seeing nothing at all.

"Filter the light, go to black and white image enhancement with a thermal overlay" Anton suggested as he searched and Fred complied, switching his visor over to BWIM and switching his thermal optics on... and froze as he finally saw it.

Incredibly faint, like a spider web in the light air, was the blurred outline of a pattern of hexagons. Each was probably thirty centimetres wide, stretching out of sight into the trees above them, but he lost sight of them as they moved around closer to him. Anton picked up a pebble, tossed it, and for a split second as it passed through, a wave of hexagons shimmered into view on the thermals before fading away again.

"Covenant Active Camouflage Field" Anton said with authority as he swung his helmet around, measuring its size. "Probably mixed with the ECM field Catherine saw from above".

"And the reason she couldn't see anything on the ground" Fred added, kicking himself for missing the obvious. Granted it was clearly a much smaller field than the inverted field that had been used to hide the Long Night of Solace but it explained perfectly why they hadn't been able to see anything at the LZ, as he triggered his communications gear, deciding the discovery risked him breaking radio silence -

- only to get an communication error flash up on his HUD.

"Communications check" he ordered, breaking radio silence locally as he switched his helmet back to normal operational mode, and rapidly each Spartan called in their number one after the other. But when he tried his Satellite uplink back to Daredevil, he got nothing...

"We're probably inside the ECM field projected by the system" Anton speculated. "Long range communications are probably going to be blocked, short range should be fine, so long as we keep within half a kilometer or so of each other".

"Great" Fred replied, before he cocked his ear as a faint series of explosions and weapons fire started to echo down the valley from behind them, the familiar sound of UNSC small arms contrasting against the whine of Covenant plasma weapons. "And it sounds like the

Helljumpers just kicked off their own little war. The Northern and Southern Covenant pincers of the Covenant must have reached them ... so why isn't this group getting involved?"

There was no response to his question, at least not from his Spartans.

But, as if in answer, the ground rumbled slightly.

Fred looked around, and caught the leaves in the trees shiver ever so slightly, proving he hadn't just imagined it. He wasn't sure, but it felt at least like it was coming from ahead and not behind, a thought confirmed when he felt a second, heavier vibration rumble through the ground, causing the litter of the forest floor to jump slightly around him from his prone position. He started to open his mouth to ask if anyone had eyes on what was causing it-

-purple, loud and incredibly close, it punched through the cloaking field dead ahead of the Spartan line without the slightest warning. Splintering a two century old pine tree that just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, it stabbed its front two legs deep into the forest, barely missing skewering Anton and Malcom as it hauled itself up the incline, sending a shower of rocks in all directions as the sharp appendage punched through the rocky ground. Its head, looking almost like it was leering down at him moved over the hidden Spartans as the machine swayed on its feet, its massive accelerated particle cannon sweeping across them like the mouth of some creature of myth and legend, the green glow of the fuel feeds blazing like eyes in the dark as it searched for its prey. Not finding any, the legs heaved and pulled the bulk of its body forward with a terrible majesty, missing the seven insignificant humans as it moved onwards and its rear legs gained purchase, pushing forward before shifting its course towards the clearing off to the side, reaching it as a convoy of Wraith tanks began to materialize from inside the cloaking field, forming up in two perfectly neat lines right behind their leader. Turning East, it started to advance with a deceptively slow gait, the massive wedge shaped turret on its upper deck slowly sweeping left and right like an all seeing eye as it and its escorts moved to decisively end the battle in one final advance.

"Anton, into the field, tell me what you see" Fred ordered, and instantly Anton was on the move, flowing over the log he had shielded behind as the Scarab had damn near crushed him under its foot, vanishing after four quick strides into the cloaking barrier like a stick through water. "Grace, if you have any ideas on how to take that thing down, I want to hear them" he continued, glancing at the Spartan.

"I have several" the demolition and explosives expert said calmly as she studied the Juggernaut as it slowly moved East and up the gentle slope before shaking her head once. "Unfortunately, they all rely on getting under it and placing demolition charges in precise spots. With those Wraiths flanking it, that may prove difficult and hitting it anywhere else won't even dent its armour, not with our equipment".

The field next to them distorted again and Anton returned, smoothly rejoining them in silence.

"We've got a second Scarab coming up, one of the bigger ones. It'll be on us in about a minute, with another four tanks taking an easier route up, probably about a half klick separation between the two groups. Couldn't get eyes on the LZ, but there was an awful lot of activity through the trees from about where Cortana estimated".

"Three hundred meters North East, now" Fred ordered after taking in the data, mentally re-designating the LZ as a secondary target given the priority threat of _two_ _Scarabs_ moving into the attack.

The team reacted instantly to his orders, shifting as one into a compressed tactical formation and moving deeper into the forest, settling into a new position just in time for a second, even larger Scarab trimmed in silver and blue to emerge from the stealth field, following the firsts path in blatant violation of the 'keep to the trails' signs posted around the national park, making its way over to the clearing as another quartet of Wraith tanks moved up their easier route, this group moving to take the point position ahead of the larger walker.

Fred stared at the Covenant column as it formed up, feeling the expectations of his teammates like a weight on his shoulders. He was in command, it was _his_ job to come up with the plan to defend against this new threat. Out of contact with command and no way to warn them, they had to act before the Covenant forces reached the Generator complex and vaporized everything. It wasn't a huge exaggeration to say that the fate of Reach itself rested in his hands...but even for Spartans, trying to stop _this_ level of force with limited weapons-

Fred felt his thought process crash to a halt. As Major Dare had pointed out just before the drop, Spartans were _offensive_ weapons. The real question to ask was not how could he _defend_ _against_ this enemy ... but how best could he _attack_ _this_ new enemy.

And almost at once, an idea started to form in his head.

Utterly insane and possibly a good way to get his people killed, but against the possibility of doing nothing and failing perhaps the most important mission in his life...

"Listen up" he said, opening up a tactical conference and bringing up a map everyone could see, "I have an idea..."

****Time Indeterminate, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar)**

>Engineering Bay 12 Frame 18 Deck 9, USS _**Odyssey,**_**
Epsilon Eridani System**

"Attention on board the Odyssey, time is now sixty minutes until the time dilation field will be disengaged. All 302 pilots, report to the ready room, all security detachments, report to briefing room eight".

James-005 noted the voice in the background over the ships PA as he cut through the ships corridors heading towards the engineering bay. With the time counting down until the moment the _Odyssey_ would be returned to the waking universe, James had felt his unease steadily drain away. Certainty had returned to his universe, he had a mission

and a precise timeline to work with. The great weight on his shoulders had vanished, replaced with an almost buoyant feeling that at the very least, Earth had a chance to gain a powerful new ally, probably _the _ally, in the war against the Covenant, and that he would be back in combat shortly. And in order to do so...

He waited as his escort ran a keycard through a reader next to the door, which promptly opened, his escort nodding and stepping back as James returned the nod and stepped through the door, which closed behind him. His armour was laid out carefully on a heavy table in the middle of the room, with Colonel Samantha Carter working on an odd looking computer console that he guessed had to be alien, from the strange symbols covering its curved silver surface...alongside what looked like polished _rocks _of all things...

"Petty Officer, I'm just finishing up now" she said with a glance. "It shouldn't take long".

"Yes Ma'am" he replied, stepping closer to examine the suit - _his _suit. The damage from the thruster pack had been both more and less extensive than he had first thought, not breaching the inner glove and allowing decompression to happen, but tearing through much of the shielding around his fusion pack and the fuel lines that fed it, as well as the conduits to the shield generator. The fact that the power source had continued to function for so long despite such damage had been a testament to Doctor Halsey's exacting design and engineering standards, but it had finally given up the ghost only an hour after he had been beamed aboard, leaving him the choice between standing like a statue, or removing the armour and letting these people take a look at it.

It wasn't exactly like he had a choice, with his armour down and on a ship this advanced, he didn't exactly think he was in any position to fight to the death to defend its secrets, and taking a leap of faith that he just knew would make someone's head at ONI explode, he had let them look at it to see if they could patch it up.

He hadn't really expected them to actually be able to _do _anything though. He had expected to be sent back down to Reach, or back to the _Pillar of Autumn _as without his armour, he could hardly expect to fight a Zero-G battle in space, but...

"It's an _incredible_ piece of technology" the Colonel said, keying a button that caused a life sized holograph of the suit to materialize before him, his breath catching somewhat as he looked at the incredible detail presented as the various components of the holographic image separated, the chest plate itself enlarging with areas around the damage flashing red and orange, wireframe schematics showing the damage exactly as the Colonel stepped over next to him. "With the help of our computer core and the diagnostics you broadcast before shutdown, I was able to isolate and extrapolate the damaged systems around the fusion reactor and power grid. Luckily, none of the more complex parts of the systems had been damaged, just fuel lines and energy conduits, which were straight forward enough to fabricate replacements for once I was able to study the intact examples and check the data. I've replaced the armour on the back as best I can, but be aware that your protection will be slightly compromised there".

"You...did all of this in three hours?" James slowly said as he

stared at the holograph rotating in front of him, slightly aghast at the incredible detail presented there and the Colonels almost offhand attitude at being given an utterly unknown piece of technology and putting together repairs, even hasty field repairs based on little more than some diagnostic information...

"It's kind of what I do" the other said with a wry smile as she stepped back. "The real test though is if it works, so if you will..."

James nodded and quickly started to strip out of his borrowed clothes, the Colonel politely looking away until he had fixed the groin plate and leg armour in place, before turning back and helping him to put on the rest of the armour, grunting at times from the weight of the components. It took some time, but eventually the final piece was in place short of his helmet and he relaxed against the familiar feeling. He had become accustomed to the presence of his armour, had felt naked without it. He knew it was a weakness to become so reliant on a piece of technology, but could help the feeling that with his armour back in place, he was once again in control of his destiny.

Painstakingly, the Colonel methodically checked her work around his back, inspecting every seal and joint she had worked on before eventually stepping back and passing him his helmet, clearly as satisfied as she was going to be with the work and James carefully placed it back on, with the familiar click and hiss of air pressure increasing to slightly above external to ensure a positive pressure environment, chinning the primary startup control and waiting for his suit to come back to life.

Almost at once, he felt a shiver pass through the armour, the slightest vibration from his fusion pack rumbling as it started up before fading off to nothing, the weight of the armour itself fading as the reactive circuits powered up and took the load. The Colonel asked him to shoot her his diagnostic data and he did so, the senior officer picking up a Tablet computer, scrolling through screens of what he guessed were readings from his armour before she put it back down, satisfied and looked up at him through his golden faceplate.

"Okay, so far so good. Next, try to initialize your shields" she said, taking a subtle couple of steps back that didn't quite fill him with confidence. "I know you normally need to charge the emitters from a cold start, but I've manually charged the capacitors already, so you should be able to just flick the switch and go ... I think".

Taking a deep breath and trying to ignore the uncertainty from the other, he chinned the switch and braced himself. A smell like ozone came through the inside of his suit for a moment, then there was a pop, as if the air around his armour had just been displaced. With an incessant beeping, the shield power indicator flashed on red, before hesitating and finally filling from left to right with a rising hum. Reaching down, he ran his left gauntlet over his arm...and felt a frictionless yet iron hard resistance a few millimetres from the surface of his suit...

His shields were back up and running.

Stepping forward, he had to restrain the urge to try and jump, lest he put dents in the Colonels ship. The armour felt exactly as it should feel; the biolayer perfectly adhering to his skin and matching his body temperature, and the slightest move being perfectly mirrored and amplified by the armour itself, making him feel as if he was wearing absolutely nothing. He very carefully moved all his limbs around their full range of motion as he had been trained to do during diagnostic exercises, not feeling any stiffness in the Gel layer or friction in the reactive metal liquid crystal, his suit all but singing with power around him as he moved.

He was a Spartan again.

Time Indeterminate, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) Pilots Ready Room, USS **_Odyssey,**_** Epsilon Eridani System**

"Ten-Hut!"

"As you were" Colonel Mitchell replied to the shout as he entered the briefing room, a folder of notes in one hand and a mug of coffee strong enough to be used as cleaning solvent in the other. Situated aft of the ship in front of the main sublight engine array with quick access to either hanger bay, the pilots ready room made Cameron Mitchell feel depressingly old every time he walked into it these days. It seemed only yesterday he was in flight school, only last night he was flying over Afghanistan and only this morning he had crashed what was left of his F-302 into a glacier after ramming a Goa'uld Al'kesh, to protect SG1 from Anubis while they powered up the Ancient Outpost and went droning on to victory.

And that was two years ago.

Few of the faces in the room staring back at him were familiar from his own class at Area-51. These were the next generation of 302 pilots, Airforce and even a couple of Marine pilots, the USMC as always happily welcomed in, as much to infuriate the rest of the Navy as anything else Cameron suspected, legend having it that the 'feud' between the USN and USAF went back all the way to a funding dispute between General West and Admiral Jeremiah in '94, the later damn near shutting down the formers command before Daniel Jackson cracked the Stargate open, before finally managing to kill most research off afterwards, until Aphosis had come storming through several years later.

The revenge of the Air Force had been both extended and glorious in keeping anyone from the USN the hell away from anything more than token positions. Even the Army had finally been let in the front door with the ascendance of General Francis Maynard to the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the man polite enough to _ask _rather than _demand _access and thus avoiding the brick wall of institutionalized red tape and delaying tactics that had kept the increasingly furious Navy away from the BC303 and BC304 programs, the Army becoming the third member of what was becoming rapidly known in the Pentagon as the 'No Squids Allowed Club'.

And so, here was the next generation without a single Navy pilot among them. A bunch of Lieutenants and Captains personally approved by the Chief of Staff, card carrying Don level members of the Fighter Pilot Mafia every last one of them. Cameron had been from the

generation before them, trained on the F4 Phantom before almost immediately converting to the single engine F-16, something that had instantly made him a second class pilot according to the USAF pecking order ... at least until he had almost casually slapped around F-15 drivers at Red Flag two years in a row when they had tried to jump him on simulated Air to Mud missions, something that had raised more than a few high ranking eyebrows and put a close watch on his career from that point on. He had served in Afghanistan with distinction, bouncing back quickly enough from a horrific intelligence mistake that had seen him put ordinance onto a refugee convoy instead of a high value target and shortly before he had been due to head back out, he had reported to base only to find a half dozen officers -including no less than three Generals- wanting to talk to him about an exciting opportunity...

The first class of F-302 pilots had been some of the Air Forces most experienced people, the next class however had been instead skimmed from the top three percent of pilots from the next couple of years worth of graduates from the Academy. Put through their paces by instructors from the first class, half of them had made the grade and gone into intensive training based upon hard won combat experience; the theory being that the best of the new, young, 'adaptable' generation would be in a better position to help take space warfare doctrine to the next level without being hamstrung by traditional tactics and ideas.

And as he looked out at a prime example of this next generation, Cameron Mitchell felt old.

Until he remembered he was in charge of a unit that would go down beside people like Neil Armstrong and the Wright Brothers in the history books , and that the accepting pecking order in this black division of the US military went SGI everyone else...

"Be seated" he called as he walked to the front of the room and the pilots settled down. "We are on the clock people, so I'll keep this brief. You all know the situation and you've been informed with the crew about our intentions. As Colonel Telford is still on leave and missed the Odyssey leaving Earth, General Landry has placed me in command of the fighter wing, I'll be taking out his bird with Teal's taking Second Seat. Any questions?"

He might be one of the 'previous generation' F-302 pilots, but he had commanded the massive furball against Anubis, made instant ace in said battle with six kills, and received an Air Force Cross for having the balls to ram an Al'Kesh before it rammed SGIs Scout ship, so unsurprisingly, no-one had any problems with him being in command.

Well that and David Telford could be a real hard ass sometimes...

"The game plan is simple" he continued, inserting a USB stick into the console built into the lectern at the front of the room and activating the large screens to his left and right with flight roster information and load outs. "I'll lead the group and Blue from the Starboard hanger. Riggs" he nodded at the Major in the front row, "you have Gold from Port. Flight Leaders who have the new Block twenty's will be packing eight missiles instead of four, but watch your ammo, it's a target rich environment out there and it looks like

we're a long way from reloads right now. Flight leaders will also each be issued a single Mark Eight Warhead but you are not authorized to use them within eighty thousand kilometres of Reach" he added quickly as the 'happy look' started to appear on far too many faces in the room. "According to our Spartan guest, any major EPM near the atmosphere will disrupt the power uplinks to their orbital defences, so don't fire off your nuke unless you receive weapons free orders from Odyssey. Clear?"

There was a sea of nods around the room and Cameron nodded back, before turning to face the left screen, which showed an representation of Reach, its moons and the locations of their new allies and new enemies. "Our job is simple; we're to provide close escort for the Odyssey. We'll be engaging enemy fighter and bomber analogues inside a threat bubble of fifty kilometres, but watch her point defences. Support UNSC fighters and ships where you can and take shots at targets of opportunity as they present themselves, but for God's sake don't stray. We are here in this universe for an unknown length of time, I don't want to lose one damn person in the first battle, understood?"

Every head in front of him again nodded, with a sincerity that Mitchell suspected would last roughly as long as it took to flip the 'Master-Arm' switch in the cockpit when they launched. It wasn't that they were insubordinate in any way of course ... it was just that these people were fighter pilots.

Hell, they were fighter pilots fighter pilots.

All of them had been put through the most rigorous training and quite a few of them had fought in battles before, but never anything like this. This battle zone around Reach was what pilots went to bed dreaming about, the ultimate test of themselves and their craft in the mother of all battles. It wasn't that they were unafraid of death, but they hadn't joined the Air Force to fly C-17's either. The limited engagements F-302s had participated in, with the single exception of the Battle over the Ancient Outpost, had been short, sharp affairs, with a handful of ships and a few units of fighters facing off against each other. Earth's fighters had acquitted themselves well, with a highly favourable kill ratio, but compared to the controlled chaos of the opening of General Charles Homers brilliant air campaign against Iraq in Desert Storm, or even the crazy gun to gun dogfights in World War Two that the Army Air Corps pilots had engaged in, they had been ... lacking.

This battle on the other hand...it showed every sign of being Gotterdammerung. Ragnarök. The end of all things, the greatest battle in the history of the Air Forces space combat program thus far, one that had the potential to make even the Battle of Dakara between the Jaffa, Goa'uld and Replicators look like a minor sideshow.

Which was the reason he had to be out there. Landry had made it clear -being a former fighter pilot himself- that he knew his people would be on the Fighter Pilot equivalent of a sugar high the second they launched, and so he had made it his job to run sheep herder on the pilots. Even the brashest hotshot would think twice before trying to play games with someone who had rank, combat experience and an SG1 patch over them ... in theory anyway.

"So" he continued, pointing out the display, "you've all been briefed on the enemy fighter and bomber craft, as well as allied craft by the Petty Officer. You know what they can do and you know what you can do so I'll keep this short and sweet. The Odyssey is going to move to engage the enemy Capital Ships around Gamma station to get the Covenants attention, and clear the way for Phase Three. Our secondary is to interdict any more boarding craft, so prioritize Phantoms and Spirits heading for Gamma Station if you have the time. Given what Marks did to that Covenant Sniper Cruiser, I don't see Odyssey having any problems with the Destroyers in the area, but keep your damn eyes open and maintain situational awareness. It's going to be chaos out there, and missions orders are going to change on the fly, so check your proximity readouts. I don't want any of you drifting into the point defence envelope of the enemy because unlike the Goa'uld, these people mount weapons that are lethal to fighters. So if I call you to break, break," he said as firmly as he could, before shutting down the screens. "Any questions?"

Nobody had one. Mitchell knew they had been going over the few minutes of sensor logs the ships systems had recorded since arriving in detail, and that the Spartan had given them surprisingly extensive information on the enemy craft for a ground pounder, including general Covenant tactics and doctrine. They were about as prepared as they could be for this ... and now all that was left to do was to throw the dice.

"Alright" Mitchell nodded. "Wheels up in forty minutes, get your checklists and get the hell out of here".

The assembled pilots stood and moved out, talking in that excited way people did before missions, their checklist folders, to Mitchells despair, not decorated with the time honored pictures of naked women as they had back in his day when he had been a young USAF officer on his first tour of duty, but with printed out web-comics and the oddest cartoon baby with a football shaped head declaring that victory was indeed, his, forcing him to ask if he really was getting too old for this job.

Mostly so he didn't have to ask himself how many of the kids would be coming back alive from this campaign.

Well, that was up to him wasn't it?

Packing up his notes, he headed for the door.

****Time Indeterminate, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar)**
Bridge, USS **Odyssey, Epsilon Eridani System****

"What's our status?" Landry asked without ceremony as he walked onto his bridge.

"Shields are at full strength" Carter replied from the weapons/operations station next to Marks at the Navigation station, working her board with the studied nonchalance that came from being the person who had helped design it. "I've routed additional energy from the ZPM to the weapons capacitors so we should be able to fire the Asgard weapons more or less indefinitely. All other weapons are armed and the time dilation system is stable. Hyperdrive is good, the repairs were minor, but if we had tried to push it again, it could have been another story entirely".

"Good" the General said, looking around the bridge in satisfaction as he set his tiny headset for the fifth time and hoped it would stay there for once. He had changed out of his Class-A uniform and into one of the flight suits that the crew wore, as much for morale purposes as for the fact that it was just a damn sight more comfortable to wear when going into combat, but his damn headset kept refusing to stay still on his ear. "Cooper?"

"All fighters are manned and ready for launch" she said from her new position behind him at the large plotting table that she had been sent to after Carter had taken over her station. Not that she had complained over the fact, where Samantha Carter was concerned, _everyone _gave her precedence. "Out targeting and tracking system have been reprogrammed and the point defence protocols updated with Covenant sensor profiles. The Asgard holographic system is online, and the beaming system is locked onto the co-ordinates the Petty Officer selected for his insertion".

"Good work" Landry nodded, turning back to Carter as she announced over the ships PA system that it was now three minutes until the time dilation field would be disengaged. "Carter, status of our guest?"

"He's just arriving in the ring room, ready to beam to Gamma Station" Carter replied, working her console without pausing. "I've uploaded the databurst from his suits mission recorder to the comm system, I couldn't make heads or tails of the file format and encryption, but he assures me the AI on the other end will be able to figure it out. Oh, he loaded up on some equipment from arms locker three on the way. C4 and some of those new Proximity Claymores from SOCOM mostly, but Teal'c, uh, loaned him his Staff Cannon. Said it suited him better".

Landry raised an eyebrow at the thought of the Spartan running around with a gun pulled out of a Death Glider and quite capable of blowing through solid metal blast doors with few problems before dismissing the thought.

"Those two make an interesting pair" he observed. He had been somewhat unsure if the two would be best friends forever, or just challenge each other to some ritual fight to the death after getting to know each other, but so far they seemed to be leaning more towards the former than the later. "Teal'c was surprisingly eloquent about his support for declaring war on the Covenant, after listening to the Petty Officers story..."

"Teal'c can be a bit ... twitchy about religious justifications for mass killings" Carter reflected, turning slightly to face him at the rather dramatic understatement. "He spent decades as the First Prime of Apophis in the full knowledge that he wasn't a God, just to try and save who he could, when he could, but otherwise being forced to kill innocents, often by the planet load. As soon as James repeated the Covenants only transmission to humanity..."

"Your destruction is the will of the Gods, and we are their instrument" Landry quoted as he reflected on Teal'cs flat statement that the Spartan was being completely truthful with them, realizing just how much he was banking on the Jaffas almost uncanny ability to detect any sign of falsehood in others. If there was any real single

point of failure in his planning, it was that James had not been entirely on the level with them ... but for probably the hundredth time, he pushed the thought to the side and mentally berated himself for trying to second guess his decisions already made. "Frankly" he continued, pushing onto a new topic, "I was more surprised that Valla was so vehement about protecting Reach, probably the most supportive of _any_ _cause_ I've ever seen her, and Daniel wasn't exactly the usual picture of restraint he's been in the past".

"You need to remember Sir that Valla was effectively burned alive last year by a prior in the Ori's Galaxy" Carter pointed out, and Landry conceded the point with a nod, suddenly recalling the way she had flinched at the descriptions of the Covenant 'glassing' planets James had supplied, something he had noted but not really paid attention to at the time that now made more sense. "That and the religious overtones of exterminating a species because a 'God' says so; between the Goa'uld who infested her and the Ori who killed her, she has a somewhat ... lower tolerance then most for using religion to justify those sorts of actions. And as for Daniel" Carter shrugged slightly. "He's a lot tougher then some people think, he would never accept that any species has the _right_ to destroy another, he's always looking for another way out. Remind me to tell you the story of the Enkarans and the Gadmeer someday".

"Well, he'll get his chance to try and talk them down shortly" Landry grunted. "First, let's go about causing a crisis of faith to get their attention. Give me ship wide".

Carter turned back to her board and worked the controls for a few seconds. "Done".

"This is Landry" he said, hearing the noise on the bridge fall off as everyone stopped to listen to his voice as it came from every PA on the ship and was broadcast into every 302 cockpit in the hangers, as he tried to find the words to explain why he was asking his people to fight and possibly die in a war that simply was not theirs. "I could give you some stock speech about teamwork and being the best of the best, but all of you know you're the best, and you've proven your teamwork to me long ago" he said finally, walking away from his chair as he gathered his thoughts. "I could give you some classic word such as 'do your duty' or 'good hunting', but I would never insult any of you by suggesting you would ever give me less than your very best, and I'm sure that some of you hold doubts about jumping into a war that we don't have any stake in".

"So, instead I want you to think of home" he continued as he slowly walked around the bridge to look down at Reach yet again, placidly sitting there in the frozen moment of time. "I want you to think about your family, I want you to think about your friends. I want you to remember the day you were briefed on the threats in _our_ _universe_, be it Goa'uld seeking to enslave us, the Wraith seeking to farm us or the Ori simply wishing to annihilate us. I want you to remember how you felt when you found out the sky you had looked up to in wonder since childhood was full of terrors beyond our worst nightmares and I want you to remember the courage and dedication you showed when you put your hand up to step forward and become one of the few who helped draw a line that we promised ourselves they would _never_ _cross_ unless it was over our dead bodies, because today we're doing it again.

A billion people are on the planet under us, people no different from those waiting for us at home. Flawed people with hopes and dreams, successes and failures; every single one condemned to die unless we have the courage to simply do what is _right _and draw a new line, one that the Covenant dare not cross" he said, slowly looking around the bridge and into his crews eyes, seeking and finding the resolve he had hoped as he strode back to his command chair. "We _will _get home, never doubt that, but if the price for saving _our _world is to save this one first, then I for one am damn well glad to pay it".

He took a final look across his bridge, seeing nothing but support and readiness in the eyes of his people and satisfied at that, he finally sat down in his command chair, glancing at the windows and frozen battle beyond.

"All hands to Battle Stations".

3. Chapter 3

****Chapter 2. **Reach - Part 2**

****0617 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>Alpha Team AO, Orbital Defence Generator Facility A-331, Reach,
Epsilon Eridani System**

A series of dull thuds sounded across the still night air of the valley.

Master Sergeant Edward Buck did not look for the source of the sound, recognizing it as the auto-mortar unit the Spartans had set up firing another salvo of projectiles off.

>This time however, instead of sending high explosive death downrange on top of whatever poor target the Spartans had decided needed to die, the projectiles were fired on a much steeper trajectory, a dozen orbs of brilliant light exploding into view half a kilometre above the battlefield. In the flickering white light of the flares Veronica had ordered up, a hoard of figures could be seen pouring from the distant tree line as the Covenant launched their assault. A din of barking and yelping carried across the still night air and the few ODSs who hadn't already stood to did so, steeling themselves to meet the wave of figures pouring out of cover towards the base of the hill the UNSC redoubt was set upon.<p>

"We've got ourselves a genuine Gruntpocalypse boys!"

Which of the ODSs made the call was unclear, at least until a more senior Shock Trooper next to him reached over and whacked said Marine in the back of his helmet for saying such a stupid thing, but the sentiment was none the less felt across the entire defensive line as troops disengaged safeties and cocked their rifles. Grunts were insignificant and weak creatures, generally equipped with the worst weapons in the Covenant inventory and considered something of a joke by both human and Covenant forces alike. In small numbers, they were little more than target practice; they were sloppy, careless and broke easily, used more often than not to draw fire away from Jackals and Elites while they did the real work.

>In large numbers however...they became something entirely different. They almost became the living proof of the so-called 'Mob Effect'.<p>

One Grunt was a coward.

Six Hundred were the next best thing to a force of nature.

On they came, many on all fours, at a speed that would have shocked anyone who had only ever seen the odd grunt waddling about, the barks and yaps from each building into a roaring din that encouraged each other to new spurts of speed - and Buck let himself feel a moment of deep regret for the fact that the Spartans had already used up almost all of the HE and FRAG rounds for the mortar, because a couple of dozen spread among the carpet of Grunts would have had quite useful results about now.

"Count is approximately Six Zero Zero for each flank" Wellesley spoke up in Edward Bucks ear and he briefly switched his helmet display over to an area Tactical Map controlled by the AI, noting the waves of Scarlet contact markers were indeed pushing in from both the Northern and Southern flanks, leaving the East and main access road suspiciously empty ... but that was a question for Veronica to sort out. "Hold order remains in place for heavy weapons teams at this time".

The first of the Grunts had already covered the distance between the treeline and base of the hill, the wave of figures parting around or over the boulders, stumps and none too few discarded HEV pods the ODSs had arrived in before pushing briskly up the longer slope towards the Generator Complex entrance in the cliff face and its defenders. It was a simple but common Covenant envelopment, hitting both sides of the defensive line simultaneously with massed numbers of bodies - a tactic best described as suicidal in the face of the kind of weapons the ODSs and their Marine friends were packing ... but of course the Grunts were never expected to actually carry the day; their job was to just probe the defenders, wear them down, eat up some ammo, and hold their attention.

Having seen this tactic more than once, Buck ignored the heaving mass for the moment, directing his scoped BR55 back along the tree line and wholly unsurprised to see the stealthy movement of Jackals edging out from the treeline and picking their way down towards the base of the hill in the wake of the rampaging packs of Grunts, clearly planning to use the distraction to get set up with their Beam Rifles and Needle Carbines to cover the _real _attack that would be coming next.

"You seeing this Wellesley?" he asked as he made a count, figuring about forty Jackals were sneaking down as best they could into the modest cover along the valley floor that would get them in range of the defenders.

"Of course" the other replied easily. "And its much the same on the Southern Side. The Pawns are advancing, the knights moving into position, but the Bishops and Rooks have not yet revealed themselves".

"English please, mister English?"

The AI sighed at his curt response.

"Motion Sensor tracking shows many more Covenant troops inside the

tree line" the AI replied with just a touch of a huff in its tone. "This Grunt attack is most probably just-"

"-a probe to test our defences for the real attack to follow" Buck finished as he swept his rifle over the tree line, but any Covenant forces were in too deep in the darkness to pick out. "I _have _done this before you know". Switching his attention back to the Grunt wave, the rangefinder on his scope counted down the last few meters as he settled his crosshairs on the Green/Emerald armour of one of the higher ranking grunts, waiting for-

"Engage!" the command was barked from Major Dare back in her CP and Buck gently squeezed his trigger, the snap of the shot lost in the sudden cacophony of sound as a hundred ODSTs opened fire, the Grunt in his scope spinning to the ground with its face a shattered mess. Scores more Grunts were cut down in the front row, staggering and rolling to a halt, but the wave kept pushing, moving around and in some cases over the dead bodies as tracer rounds shot downrange. Some grunts returned fire wildly with their Needler and plasma pistols despite being way out of range, but the useless gesture seemed none the less to encouraged the pack to redouble their screaming as they charged forward. Some ran into the lines of Razorwire and became tangled, all but throwing themselves into it to clear the obstacle, while the smarter ones simply used overloaded plasma pistol shots to vaporize holes in the defences. Mines detonated and scathed through yet more of the crazed animals, but it only seemed to encourage them, and every mine detonated cleared the way for future attacks.

Switching targets, Buck traced his optics back downrange to the Jackals, confident in his people's ability to shoot down a wave of Grunts without his micromanagement. A new wave of flares was launched into the sky as the first wave started to fizzle out and in the reinforced light he spotted a new wave of Grunts moving out of the treeline ... except this group was not moving in a mindless charge but with clear purpose, carrying with them a number of 'Shade' portable turrets to backstop the Jackals settling into cover at the base of the hill. The triple barrel emplaced weapons were not at all something to take lightly; with near unlimited ammunition in the short term and a high rate of fire, the dozen turrets he could tag on his VISOR display could put an incredible amount of suppressive fire downrange, but he knew that situation was probably well in hand ... and he had an increasingly more pressing concern to worry about right now.

The Grunt wave was still pressing forward at full speed, and their returned fire while poor in accuracy, had sufficient volume that at this range it was getting to be rather more serious. Increasing numbers of plasma strikes struck and exploded on and around the lip of the trench, making Marines shy away and choose their shots more carefully, the diminishing of outgoing fire providing an opening for the equally diminished numbers of Grunts to make one last push forward to plasma Greande range, many of them already clutching the tiny spheres in their claws as they paid the price to get close enough to lob them in as Buck made a quick calculation of distances and barked a codeword order-

And almost before the word was out of his mouth, the Confetti Makers opened fire.

The old .30 Caliber Light Machine Guns had been a favourite of various separatist groups, but rarely seen in UNSC service. Almost useless against a target beyond forty to fifty meters thanks to its incredible recoil, the weapon was almost a contradiction in terms; a close combat machine gun. Useful if you wanted to kill everything in a room in no time flat perhaps, but with limited endurance and woeful accuracy making it of questionable value in a sustained engagement. The combination of 'faults' however had endeared it to various rebel groups who were often far less discriminating of their targets than UNSC troops. But in the planning for RED FLAG, Buck had decided if they were really going to try and pull off a boarding action against the Covenant, a weapon that could be used to fill the tight confines of a starship with hundreds of rounds of .30 AP might just come in handy at some point.

>He hadn't expected to be using them on against a wave of Grunts screaming for blood on the surface of Reach of course, but

...<p>

The last desperate lunge of the wave of Grunts simply disintegrated, there was no other word for it. The dozen machine guns chewed through their 300 round magazines in ten seconds flat, the gunners not so much firing their weapons as pulling the trigger and holding on for dear life against the recoil, screaming roars filling the air and tracers scathed through the final push of the Grunts and stopped it dead in its tracks. Literally.

Then, as if to rub salt in the wound for the Covenant, the valley blew up.

The Jackals at the bottom of the hill had, perhaps understandably, settled in and around the only real cover available to start sniping; the discarded HEV pods. The Grunts too had made for the same area, probably in the expectation that the Jackals could cover them as they set up their weapons. Combined, the snipers and heavy turrets could probably put enough firepower back on the hill to at least force the ODSs to keep their heads down while the real attack started...in theory anyway.

And as tactical thinking went, it was a decent enough idea.

The flaw with the thinking however was that while they were fully qualified and highly experienced in HEV use, the Spartans who had deployed with the ODSs were not ODSs. Neither, technically speaking, was Veronica Dare who had transferred out of the Corps into ONI, where she had learned the hard way that any and all equipment was expendable for the sake of the mission. And while an ODS would generally take great umbrage with filling their signature piece of equipment with a couple of kilos of C7 explosives from the ample supplies that had been stockpiled at the Generator Complex the Spartans merely thought of it as 'expediency'.

The explosion as every one of the rigged pods detonated simultaneously was spectacular and a number catcalls came from the ODSs as their most prized possession turned into shrapnel and smoke. Night was turned into day for a moment as the hundred or so Jackals and Grunts in the kill zone of the IEDs simply disintegrated - except one somewhat unfortunate Grunt at the edge of the detonations whose Shade was sent rocketing into the air on a ballistic arc back towards their deployment zone, riding a trail of flaming methane, passing through the rising clouds of smoke and fire and vanishing

from sight ... as other shadows and shapes suddenly formed in the twisting night air, Buck frowning as he focused in-

-just in time for dozens of dark, winged shapes to tear through the smoke at speed, heading right for them.

"Drones!" he snapped to Wellesley as he raised his weapon, his VISOR display automatically tagging and passing along the contact information to Wellesley - but the flyers opened fire before he could.

A wave of overcharged Plasma bolts tore through the sky towards the defensive line. Green blobs of plasma crashed down in a punishing wave into and around the trench lines, throwing up dust and smoke as the Drones closed in. ODS'Ts were forced to dive for cover as the blasts slammed down around and among them.

>However, with the sheer speed of an AI, Wellesley was already reacting, making the targets and passing them onto the heavy weapons units in the bunkers backstopping the firing lines. The nests of M41 chainguns opened fire moments later, sending streams of orange tracers through the smoke filled sky as the gunners sought their targets. The insect-like drones were swatted from the sky as the AAA fire swept their sectors under the AI's guidance, but more than enough pushed through to turn and dive almost directly overhead, a blue glow appearing in many of their hands as they plummeted towards them defensive line-<p>

"GRENADES!" he warned and the Shock Troopers just getting back to their feet again dove for cover as a wave of blue plasma grenades were flung down by the insect like creatures into the trench. In that instant, unit cohesion was lost as Marines sought to avoid having the terrifying weapons adhere to them, the screams of Marines unlucky enough to have one of the blue orbs adhere to them being cut off in explosions as they and anyone within a few meters were consumed, tons of dirt exploding all over the place. The lack of Shrapnel from the Covenant weapons was a blessing, keeping casualties surprisingly light despite the visible devastation, but casualties were ultimately not the point. The ODS'T's were hardly broken by any stretch of the imagination and even as the Drones zipped past to land inside the perimeter, the bunkers doors slammed open and the reaction teams from Charlie Companies Marines moved out, firing from the hip as they started a murderous close quarters game of hide and seek. Few soldiers however were looking down the slopes as agile purple vehicles punched through the curtain of smoke at the base of the hill, the IEDs, mines or barriers that might have dissuaded them now cleared away to give the Covenant light armour a straight shot at their disorganized defensive line.

"INCOMING VEHICLES NORTH, _ENGAGE_" Buck shouted, suiting actions to words as leaned down and appropriated an M19 launcher from a weapons cache that had been emplaced specifically for this situation, shouldering it and releasing the safety in a smooth practiced motion. The screening line of Ghosts opened fire as he started to aim, sprays of Blue fire splattering all across the defensive line to keep as much pressure up as possible, as heavier Revenant's and Spectres behind them threw a withering hail of heavier plasma bolts at the bunkers to try and suppress the crews inside frantically trying to reload the Chainguns.

Buck ignored the firepower streaking towards him with an indifference

born from a great deal of training and experience. The Ghosts were closing far too fast to bother trying to lock them up so he just dumb fired from the iron sights, a number of other rockets jetting out on trails of fire along with his as other AT teams engaged the incoming. Four of the Ghosts exploded as the heavy rockets connected, one hapless vehicle taking three hits simultaneously and disintegrating, the surviving quartet however just ignited their booster pods and accelerated, one heading straight for him as he stood there, caught with an empty launcher and no time to react, as it hit the lip of the tightly packed earth in front of him -

-and used it like a ramp, leaping over the trench and clearing his head by millimetres, his teeth chattering from the antigravity waves as it skimmed over his face and pushed him down at the ground, the Ghost crashing through the wrecked perimeter fence behind and above him as he smacked his head against the side of the trench. He watched, stunned, as two other Ghosts followed the firsts example successfully further down the line, a forth just a tad too slow to do so as the nearby ODS'T's rallied and poured fire at it, a half dozen rifles on full auto tearing into the vulnerable underside and sending it into spin as its power systems failed, the helpless vehicle cart wheeling into an intact section of the perimeter fence before exploding.

Trying to shake off his dazed head, he ignored the familiar tang of copper in his mouth in favour of his bio-monitors that remained solidly in the green, the comforting bulk of his rifle slipping into his questing hands as he turned down slope to face the rest of the enemy wave-

Just in time to come face to face with an Elite.

Time continued to move in slow motion for him as his rifle slowly came up on reflex, the snarling alien jumping with a number of others off their vehicles as they cruised past, parallel to the trench line. Instead of following the Ghosts over the line and into the inner perimeter, the Elites were deploying directly into the primary defensive lines while the Grunt gunners on their vehicles covered them, charging into the close quarters battle that rendered the ODS'Ts advantages of numbers and firepower useless in the face of their shields, physical strength and close combat weapons.

>Buck furiously willed his rifle to come up faster, but his hands continued to move at the same glacially slow pace that the Elite seemed to be falling at. He knew the Elite would certainly get its sword through his chest before he could fire, and even if he did fire first, it was unlikely it would be enough to deflect its descent or strike away from him in time - in short, it seemed that he was dead.

...Or at least so it appeared, until an M60 Shotgun interjected itself over his shoulder at an oddly normal speed in the otherwise agonisingly slow moment, gripped by an enormous green gauntlet that casually shoved the heavy weapon like a pistol into the chest of the slowly reacting Elite, fired-

The shotgun blast shattered the frozen moment - along with the Elites head; the alien slammed back against the lip of the Trench it had been leaping over, the sword shutting down as it lost its grip on the activation button, barely centimetres from stabbing into him. Buck snapped his weapon up from the hip and sprayed on reflex for good

measure, the heavy AP rounds from his Battle Rifle tearing the Elites chest apart as the Elites Energy Sword shut off, still clutched in a death grip by its owner.

Two more scarlet painted Elites landed in the Trench close by, a half dozen ODSTs desperately trying to gain a line of fire being picked up and thrown bodily backwards as one smashed some kind of exotic war hammer into the ground, a shockwave rippling out and throwing the Marines away as Buck pushed himself back to his feet. The second alien roared a challenge with a brandished sword as it spotted a worthy opponent; the Spartan who had saved his life diving past Buck into roll that let him snatch the sword hilt from the dead hand of the First Elite before coming smoothly back to its feet from the roll, igniting blade and bringing it around in an overhead cut at the Elite in the same motion.

The Elite almost contemptuously parried the thrust, the two weapons locking together and swinging away to tear into the side of the trench-

-Which was apparently the Spartans plan all along as the other hand thrust the Shotgun it was still carrying into the face of the Elite and jerked the trigger, a look of outrage at the idea of bringing a gun to a sword fight crossing the Elites face for a millisecond before most of it was removed.

The final Elite started to turn away from the Shock Troopers it had been facing as it belatedly woke up to the critical threat behind it but it was far too late. In a blurred motion between blinks, the Spartan closed the distance and slashed the sword viciously with enough force to send the Elites head flying out over the trench line, the Elites body remaining upright for a fraction of a second before it slowly toppled backwards and crashed to the ground of the trench.

"Secure the Area" Buck shouted, forcefully shaking off his amazement at the Spartan killing three Elites in less than six seconds and forcing himself to get back to work, the ODSTs responding on instinct to the NCO tone in his voice and picking themselves up. Buck almost absently ejected the half used magazine from his rifle and slapped a new one in, the automatic movements of his hands bringing his focus right back as he looked around. The Covenant vehicles had mostly been neutralized now, a brief spurt of chatter from Captain McKays sniper teams on overwatch telling him that they had picked off most of the surviving drivers and gunners. And even as he started to bring his weapon up to deal with the few remaining Grunts in the vehicles, the Spartan casually pulled a M6D Magnum from a holster and fired four rapid shots, each one striking one of the diminutive aliens in their head and ending the threat from their heavy support weapons they were firing wildly at everything as the attack was stopped cold.

>Shaking his head slightly at the sheer carnage the Spartan had managed to pull off, he turned his attention back to his part of the line, double checking that the Elites were definitely down in passing. "Get the Medics to the injured!" Buck ordered as he double checked that the Elites were down for the count. "This isn't over yet Marines, keep your eyes open!"

Acknowledgements were yelled back mixed with more than a few 'Ooh-rah's!' as the Marines cleared their sectors, reloaded weapons

and helped each other get back on the firing lines. He waved off Corporal Harper, the medic assigned to this part of the line as he moved in on him and instead, pointed the man to Marines further down the line who were lying in the trench - but still moving, turning his attention back to the big picture. Wellesley was still updating and broadcasting the Tactical Map tied in from the hundreds of sensors in the area, and at a glance he could see the last couple of red icons inside the perimeter wink out in time with a couple of explosions; the five surviving Ghosts that had tried to make for the Generator complex had run into a force of Warthogs, the chain guns they carried ending the debate rather decisively after a brief high speed pursuit through the ancillary buildings of the complex outside the massive cave entrance. The other Spartans appeared to be enjoying themselves as they cleaned up the remaining Elite teams with the help of Captain McKays sniper teams with the same cold efficiency as this one here had demonstrated on the Southern side, and while personnel losses were light, there were a number of buildings continuing to burn fiercely, along with the wrecks of the Covenant vehicles blown to bits and-

He froze as his gaze traced back down towards the cliff at the far end of the trench line where a fiercely burning Spectre lay glowing in the night air. There had actually been little action that far down the line, the Covenant offensive much more concentrated on his part of the line, but for a split second he had seen the oddest blurring outline of what looked like men moving along the cliff-

"Zero Three Nine" he shouted as the reality of what he had seen clicked, leaping up to the lip of the trench by using the body of one of the Elites as a stepping stone, "on me, now!"

It was one of the more remarkable attributes of Spartans. Other people might be slightly taken aback by such an order from a higher ranking soldier outside of their regular chain of command ... but not a Spartan.

"Sir" the other simply acknowledged the order, vaulting up beside him as Buck hurried for the APC twenty meters away sitting there, a second Spartan materializing as if by magic from the darkness to join them, Buck rapidly opening a link on the set-aside frequency for the rest of Omega Team as well as his own squad with Veronica, knowing Wellesley would be monitoring them and pass on the alarm.

"Look alive people" he said, pointing to the driver's seat of the vehicle as he vaulted into the gunners position and kicked the dead grunt out of the way, hoping and praying the Spartans knew how to work these things, a hope rewarded as the vehicle shuddered and then lifted smoothly off the ground as the two figures leaped aboard, "I think we have cloaked Elites heading for the primary objective inside the perimeter; converge on the CP!"

**0617 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>Alpha Team AO, Orbital Defence Generator Facility A-331, Reach,
Epsilon Eridani System

"... Did he just say _cloaked Elites?" _

"No, he said 'convoy of Grunts with early Christmas Presents', dumbass".

"All right, shut your holes, both of you before I shut them myself. Check your sectors, if they're incoming, they've got to be heading this way. These are stone cold killers, they aint cute and cuddly like me" Corporal Taylor 'Dutch' Miles growled to the men of 'The Squad' as they called themselves - mostly for lack of consensus over which name to use. "Just stay chilled till the Sarge gets here, and for God's sake don't hit him by mistake, cause that'll just _mighty_ piss him off"

The quartet of ODSs standing guard at the access door next to the gigantic blast doors locked down across the roadway down into the massive Generator complex hefted their weapons and spread out slightly. The Cave was well light by floodlights, although large amounts of smoke had cut visibility down, the perfect environment for a bunch of stealthy Elites to sneak through. And if they wanted to get into the Generator complex, perhaps set a few small anti-matter charges deep underground, then _this_ was the only way in.

The door behind them opened to his surprise and he glanced back, stiffening slightly as Major Dare walked out, inconspicuous in her ODS armour from anyone other shock trooper, except of course the IFF tag on his HUD as he turned to face her.

"Ma'am, the area isn't secure, you really shouldn't be-"

"I hope Corporal that you are not about to make suggestions about what I _can_ and _cannot_ do" the others voice came back in a somewhat amused tone as she glanced around, Miles glad to see that at least her sidearm holster was unbuttoned and her gun hand was hovering near it. "There is only one person in this unit presumptive enough to try that, and you are _not_ him".

"No Ma'am ... I mean yes Ma'am" he corrected himself in confusion, still not knowing what to make of his CO. She was a hard person to pin down, even with the knowledge that _his_ Boss clearly had a 'history' with her. She seemed to be half spook half Helljumper, sometimes seeming like an Angel of God for her looks, other times a chillingly cold killing machine in human skin from her training, leaving him utterly confused about how to relate to her in his capacity as the leader of her protection detail. Especially given that she had more field experience than any other person in the squad by far. "We have possible cloaked Elites heading for this entrance, I would strongly recommend ..."

Okay, he guessed from her initial reply that he may have pissed her off somehow, but drawing her weapon on him was a hell of a response-

Her gun fired twice, the bullets passing so close in front of his face he would forever be telling everyone when he told the story, that he could read the 'Made Proudly on Reach' stamp along the side of each slug as they passed by, a heavy pair of _thwocks_ sounding from next to him as he spun, turning towards a section of smoky air that was shimmering vividly as shields tried to dissipate the impact of the heavy slugs from the silenced pistol, the Elite's active camouflage failing even as it raised a Plasma rifle and aimed at him.

'Vera', his modified full auto BR55 with a customized trigger and heavily reinforced butt stock proved her worth to him again as he

snapped it up in a long practiced move, the weighted edge slamming into the face of the Elite. Most of the blow was absorbed by the remaining power from its shield grid, but it was enough to knock it off balance as he shifted his shoulder and charged, the sudden impact enough to cause the off balance alien to lose its footing entirely and crash to its back, Dutch reversing his grip and putting a bust through its head that killed it instantly before he bothered to take a good look at it.

>Grey armour, with what looked suspiciously like the Covenant equivalent of Satchel charges lopped over its chest-<p>

"It's a Demo Team" he concluded warningly, looking around everywhere and seeing nothing, the smoke was rolling around so much it made any hint of a cloaked Elite impossible to see, and equally screwed up his motion sensors. They were fighting this one blind. Great, just great ...

"Four man Elite SpecOpps Team" the Major added almost casually, "should be three others ... there!"

He snapped his weapon up and fired a pair of three round bursts in the direction Dare indicated with her own weapon, trusting to whatever ONI issue tech she was using and was rewarded by the flashes of several shields taking hits in the smoke, but nothing more. He swore and took a long step to the side, congratulating his foresight as a pulse of blue Plasma fire tore through where he had been standing and blew craters into the rocky cave wall, knocking the Rookie of the squad over as a wave of semi-molten stone exploded out under the touch of the beams impact directly behind him-

"The door!" he snapped as he realized the Elites were not engaging, but just suppressing as they ran for the open door the Major had just come through-

The Major was already moving, her pistol held two handed, tracking something only she could see through the smoke as she fired on the move. One Elite shimmered into view from the hits as its cloak and shields failed, in the process of aiming a Needle pistol back at the Major and sending a flurry of the razor sharp projectiles homing in on her a split second before a 14.5mm slug from Corporal Agu tore through its skull.

The cloud of razor sharp pink projectiles continued on, oblivious to the fact that the person who had fired them was dead. The Major however didn't so much as flinch, leaping forward off her momentum and leaving the pink projectiles behind to shatter harmlessly on the massive blast door in her wake, tucking into a neat roll as she hit the floor and coming up with her pistol-

-which was promptly slapped out of her hand by nothing and no-one.

Again almost faster than Dash could follow, the Major pivoted with the strike and planted a stylish yet functional combat boot into thin air, a ripple of light shimmering from the impact point along with a very alien grunt of pain before she stepped up and delivered what would have been an utterly brutal right cross against a human, given that ODSTs gauntlets were typically reinforced with a Titanium-A frame around the hand that could do very bad things to anyone it was punched into.

But this wasn't a human, and she wasn't a Spartan.

The Elites head became visible as its camouflage failed, rocking back only slightly from the blow its shields deflected as it seized her wrist, yanking her off balance and spinning her around to crush her against its chest with an incredibly thick arm holding her down, a Plasma Sword in its other hand igniting with its edge directly in front of her face as it glared out at the Quartet of ODSTs training their weapons at it.

"Son of a bitch" Dutch snarled as his crosshairs trained on the now visible Elite, angry with himself for missing the play and angry with the Major for being a Gods Damned Hero instead of staying in the CP where she belonged as he tried to line up a shot, knowing that if he didn't kill it in one, it would have plenty of time to slice the Major open and evade, assuming a ricochet from its shield didn't kill her anyway -

"God Damn it!" the Major snarled in rage and futile rage as she struggled in against the iron strength of a race that could come close to matching an armoured Spartans in hand to hand combat, her arms mostly pinned and her legs hammering its armour probably not even being noticed. "Take the shot!"

"Wort Wort Wort!" the Elite barked out at the ODSTs as they started to spread out and flank it. Dutch didn't have the first damn clue what it meant, but could guess it was some kind of variant on 'Back off, or she dies'.

"Dutch, what are we doing man?" PFC Crespo asked urgently over their COM frequency, his own Magnum sidearm aimed at the Elite, having dropped his Rocket Launcher as a somewhat ... impractical option to resolve this situation.

"Romeo?" Dutch asked the third member of the squad, seeing the Rookie slowly getting to his feet from the concussion and dismissing him as irrelevant to the situation.

"No good, shots not clean" the Sniper replied, having crouched down and aimed with his heavy rifle from only ten meters away. He could hardly miss that close, but trying to hit the Elite somewhere it would not kill the Major, even in death reflex-

"Take...the...shot" the Major gasped out over the COM channel with a priority override, clearly not breathing well in the Elites iron grip it started to slowly back away towards the door twenty or so meters behind it, its left side protected by the massive vehicle blast doors it was walking along and its eyes burning with incredible zeal as it seemed to watch everyone simultaneously. Dutch knew full well that the Major was dead the second it made the door, and what the odds were of finding it inside the maze of passageways beyond once it re-cloaked. And if it got to the Generators, given the power of Covenant explosives...

"Fire On my mark" he made the call over the COM linked to the both the squads and the Majors Helmet, settling his scope as best he could and knowing he was about to get her killed -and almost surely him moments later when the Sarge caught up with them. "Three, two-"

- he was rather suddenly cut off as the scream of a Covenant anti-gravity drive broke the stalemate; a somewhat damaged Specter coming out of nowhere and crashing into the massive blast door behind the Elite, cutting it off from the access door, a very pissed off looking Master Sergeant Edward Buck, jumping down from the gunners station without his helmet on, heading for the Elite. Clearly caught between the threat of the other ODSs circling around and the new human stomping towards him with every sign of not being willing to stop, it flattened itself against the metal barrier and spat something at the Sergeant, a warning that Dutch guessed started to translate along the lines of 'If anyone moves any closer-'

Dutch didn't even see the hand move, let alone see the draw. One second, the Sarge was walking forwards with death written on his face, the next, a double-tap from an M6D that had all but materialized into his hand blew into the Elites head , the first smashing its shields and snapping the Elites head back, the second turning most of said head to pulp as the armour piercing shell tore through the armour and into the soft, fleshy bits underneath, the Major instantly pushing the sword arm up and away, the blade raising a shower of sparks from the armoured door as it traced along its surface before it and the body fell away from her, the sword cutting off as its fail safes kicked in.

"The HELL?" Buck demanded as he shoved his sidearm back into his holster with great force and turned on his men, who lowered their weapons and managed somehow to look sheepish despite their head to toe body armour as the Major gathered her feet, taking the offered hand from the NCO to help her up. "I give you people one job - ONE job! And you can't even get that done right? What the hell does the UNSC pay you for?!"

"Uh Sarge" Dutch tried, "to move this into a not-Dutch's-fault direction, I'd like to point out that-"

"Do you want to lead the Squad?" the Master Sergeant demanded with a glare that could melt hotter than a plasma torpedo.

Dutch paused, and then figuring he was already knee deep anyway as the nominal leader of the fire team while Buck was away, shrugged.

"Yeah?"

"Oh..." Buck said, momentarily nonplussed at the response. "Well, you can't! Now, as for-"

"Bigger problems people" the Major said firmly as she dusted herself off and slapped a new clip into her pistol. "We're one Elite short of a-"

The sound of two MA5B rifles on full auto suddenly sounded from the doorway and everyone whirled, just in time to see a silver/grey figure came half falling and half flying back outside, its chest an utter wreck from highly accurate small arms fire as it crashed to the ground. Two tall figures in green power armour followed it out, splitting up in a fluid movement to cover the body before snapping their weapons down and turning to face the Major, giving her the slightest nod.

"That's four Ma'am".

"So it is" she agreed, as Dutch wondered how in the hell the two Spartans had gotten inside the blast doors without anyone seeing them, having been stationed at said door since the drop ... but deciding in the end it would probably be better if he didn't know. "Now Sergeant, Petty Officer, I need a detailed butchers bill from everyone, we have to be prepared for the ..."

Her voice trailed off as she stared out to the West, and everyone around her turned to follow her gaze, freezing as they saw what she had.

It looked almost like a giant purple insect, so enormous that it was visible even from the back of this cave on a taller hill as crested the final ridgeline before the valley and surveyed its choice of targets. A green glow on the front of it starting to form, getting brighter and brighter as it braced its feet, the front of the vehicle shifting slightly until the maw of its great cannon was pointed right at them.

There was just enough time for an incredibly crude Chinese curse to come from the Master Sergeant's lips -

**0624 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>Alpha Team AO, Orbital Defence Generator Facility A-331, Reach,
Epsilon Eridani System

Timing, was everything, Fred knew.

Give the signal too early, and this whole plan would end up as little more than a fancy way to get killed. Go too late, and Reach might still be saved, somehow, but neither the Daredevils or Omega Team would be around to see it. And probably a lot more besides. Hitting the 'sweet spot' between the extremes, was now in the hands of good luck as much as good planning. And he could only hope that some of the Master Chiefs had been gifted to him along with the command of the team.

The larger, trailing Scarab continued to move up steadily in the wake of its smaller brother, clearly content to let the lead walker cause what promised to be incredible, if short lived, carnage on its own. Covered in a silver/blue alloy of the same type Covenant ships used, the bigger trailing walker was all but immune to any single use weapons system less than Fury Tactical Nuclear Device, and strode with an almost assured gait that came with its crew knowing this fact. A covered upper deck was crowded with any number of Jackals and Grunts keeping a casual lookout for any threat stupid enough to get close as they quietly thanked the Forerunners that they had pulled this duty rather than been assigned to the ground attacks, and with no less than four Wraith tanks screening its advance, its crew probably had good reason to be confident in their invulnerability.

Fred, laying just inside the tree line on ground vibrating increasingly violently as the Scarab approached, was counting on that attitude, as he went over his hastily developed plan for the last time.

For all its awesome power, this type of Scarab was less a combat

vehicle than a mobile HQ. It carried a significant and well protected command deck inside its armoured bulk that let high ranking Elites oversee ground operations on the move, and some ONI reports had even suggested that the larger variant might actually serve as an _excavation_ _machine_ of all things - although the reports such claims were based on were apocryphal enough that ONI had not put much faith in them.

Fred however, suddenly thought it made sense. It neatly explained the walkers presence on the field behind the far more common Lekgolo controlled variant, if it had been brought in to dig down to the fusion reactors after the defences had been broken, eliminating even the possibility of collapsing all the access tunnels to buy time.

>Well, unless his team pulled off this plan anyway.
Fred had taken a risk and led his Spartans back through the forest at speed, trusting that it would still be clear of hostiles. Luck was on their side as it indeed proved to be the case, reaching his intercept point a good minute ahead of the lead Scarab. Again, they froze into good cover as it and its _Wraith_ escort moved past them, and again they went unseen before they moved up to the edge of the tree line and took their places.

Here was their only chance; a place where the clearing the Covenant heavy armour was using narrowed modestly, with a higher rise on either side matching a correspondingly modest fall in the clearing; probably a minor ridge that had been cut in half by whatever ancient glacier had ground out the clearing countless eons ago, in effect artificially raising the tree line on either side roughly seven meters above the clearing that had formed here.

A single click followed by three clicks came over the radio signalling that Anton was in position and Fred clicked back twice to signal his acknowledgement, still loath to risk anything but burst transmissions this close to such sophisticated Covenant hardware until absolutely necessary.

The shaking got heavier, and clanking of actuators got louder as the Scarab closed, his eyes not even blinking as it came into view through the tree line as it look step followed by step followed by step-

And when it took that final critical step, he rapidly flashed one acknowledgement light three times.

Hundreds of meters up-slope to the West, Kelly erupted out of the tree line in a blur of motion, skidding to a halt dead in front of the Scarab and the quartet of escorting Wraiths like a deer caught in their headlights. In a blurred motion, she raised the M19 rocket launcher she was holding and fired both rockets precisely at the Scarabs particle cannon 500 meters away, even as the Elites who had been sitting with their hatches open enjoying the cool night air scrambled for their weapons controls. That done, she dropped the spent tube and ran for the other side of the clearing in a blur, tearing up the slight slope as a blizzard of plasma bolts from the Wraiths secondary guns blew steaming craters into the ground in her wake. Quickly realizing they had no hope of actually pegging her with their secondary weapons, the gunners went to 'Plan B', the lead pair of Tanks accelerating forward and sending Blue streams of plasma from their main guns into the forest at point blank range.

Dozens of trees exploded as the unbelievable energy superheated the water content and detonated them, immolating three hundred square meters in a second and fusing the forest floor into glass as a fireball raced from and set fire to everything even remotely flammable around the impact.

The gunners watching with a mixture of epinephrine and terror searched vainly for any sign of their prey, gripping their controls as they looked for _any _excuse to keep firing at the Demon that had appeared and then vanished so quickly that some of them were not entirely sure that they had actually seen one at all ... except for the physical reality of the two rockets streaking downrange of course.

An experienced Elite was at the controls of the Scarab, one who had fought in dozens of campaigns across many human worlds. Instantly, he identified and analysed the threat on his screen. The human weapons were no match for the armour plating on his walker platform, this he knew from great experience ... but the weapons had not been fired at his legs or body, but at the gaping maw of the massive accelerated particle cannon directly in front of them, which was only partially protected by armour and against which a hit would be catastrophic.

No human could _possibly_ make such an accurate shot, it was a one in a million chance.

A _Demon _on the other hand-

Almost violently, the forward half of the Scarab simply fell ten meters as the Elite slammed his controls down, shock absorbers and gravity beams in the legs preventing them from snapping at the sudden shift of weight as the Scarab lowered itself out of the way of the incoming missiles. The desperate manoeuvre was perfectly executed with the exquisite skill of a true master of his craft, the two rockets passed harmlessly over the upper plasma turret, making it another kilometre before the short-burn engines expired out and the rockets self destructed, a complete and utter miss in all respects - the Demons best efforts clearly in vain.

Of course, he couldn't know that they had never been _intended_ to hit.

Simultaneous with the Scarab crashing to a halt and 'hunching' down on its legs, four green figures exploded into action from inside the tree line. Fred mentally willed the Scarab to stay still as he pushed himself to move faster, the quartet accelerating to almost fifty kilometres per hour and covering the thirty meters between their starting position and the edge of the cliff in less than five seconds, the Chiefs luck clearly with them as they leaped into the air with all their considerable strength, sailing across the gap to the now level upper deck of the Covenant Walker.

The top deck of the Scarab was guarded by an infantry unit of roughly squad size. A quartet of light plasma cannons had been fixed around the edge of the platform for close protection against any flank infantry manoeuvre like this, each manned by a Grunt. The Elites in charge along with the rest of the Grunts were busy on the far side of the deck, searching in vain for Kelly inside the tree line with their

weapons raised and ready, but the remaining grunts on the right hand side were being unusually diligent for their species, tracking their weapons around as they looked for any threat in the black darkness of the forest ahead of them.

Which meant they were the first to die.

Vincent and Malcom fired their silenced DMR's simultaneously, cutting down the two side gunners before they had even noticed the four green shapes materializing out of the darkness. A rapid appraisal of the situation by Fred as he sailed across the seven meter drop to the ground spotted two more Grunts manning the left side Plasma cannons, another two Grunts hefting dangerous but cumbersome looking Fuel Rod cannons next to them. Motion tracking showed additional contacts sitting in the small sheltered area created between two walls in the centre of the deck - probably Jackals - and in command of the unit were a pair of Elites in blue armour, one searching in vain for Kelly, and one who was turning back towards them, probably at the sudden noise of the Grunts clattering to the deck.

Reaching up as he flew into the compartment in a blur, Fred grabbed onto a convenient protrusion in the roof and pivoted on it, letting all the all the momentum he had built up from his sprint form into a solid _kick _into the Elites head. There was a sick sounding _crunch _as his foot crashed through its shields and caved its face in, but Fred ignored the gruesome sight as he pushed back off, sending the Elites body flying out of the Scarab and into the forest as he back flipped, landing in a crouch and drawing his weapon.

Next to him, Grace had landed into a rolling dive as effortlessly as her name implied, transferring her momentum into a fist that crashed into the middle of the second Elites back with an explosion of light that killed its shields before she thrust a silenced SMG in her other hand up and tore through the back of its skull with a quick burst. Li and Joseph arrived together and crashed into the 'wall' in the middle of the deck as the Jackals, who had indeed been sitting down lazily on the other side in the relatively sheltered area, started to react to explosion of chaos around them and spun about at Fred, reaching for plasma pistols as they fired up shield gauntlets. The Spartan noted their presence but ignored them in favour of joining with Grace to pick off the two Grunts on the plasma cannons, trusting his teammates to watch his back.

His faith was well rewarded moments later as Li and Joseph swung around behind the Jackal pack and sprayed their silenced MA5Bs into them at point blank range. Loaded with shredder rounds, the Jackals quite literally fell to under the shower of flechettes, eliminating the last of the Covenant presence on the top deck and the Spartans in control of their entry way.

Engagement time from Kelly emerging from the tree line, fourteen point three seconds and counting.

Three clicks came over the COM channel from Vincent and Malcolm as the Spartans moved into phase two, reforming aft as Fred sent two of his own clicks back. Four seconds later, the two remaining Spartans flew in from the side and joined them, Fred shooting them a quick series of hand signals that told them to take up sentry rearguard positions, before joining his fire team at the ramp down to the interior of the Scarab.

The lack of troops pouring up the ramp or shouts of alarm from the cabin was a good sign they had taken their position without being detected, but Fred assumed they had only moments before _someone_ wised up to the fact that the upstairs crew were not answering. Their access point, a ramp down to the core of the Scarab, was protected by the hazy blue glow of a Covenant shield, but that had been expected. Powered by the Scarabs reactor core, none of the Spartans weapons could hope to permanently disable it, but they had dealt with similar situations before.

Grace had recovered what she needed from the Covenant troops, using an instant adhesive from her demolitions kit to carefully place a pair of plasma grenades into precise points in the door frame around the force field. Without looking away, her light on his COM board blinked yellow and in response, the Spartans moved into a very close formation, as close as they dared to the explosives, before Fred flashed his own light blue, twice. Grace hit the grenades, the Covenant weapons glowing a azure blue as they activated and fused themselves even more solidly into the frame, the Spartan jumping back into the line in a blur as they grew brighter and brighter ...

Then they detonated in a cloud of blue plasma.

The physical damage was minor, with the grenades barely heating the armoured frame around the impact points, and didn't have a fraction the raw firepower to blow down the defensive shield. They _did_ _however_ give off a highly localized EMP as a by-product of whatever strange technology they used, which although generally useless for any real work, was conducted into the frame and into the power conduits that kept the shield active, shorting it out.

For roughly zero point eight seconds.

>Far too little time for any normal person to do anything.
But it was more than enough time for a Spartan.

In perfect unison, the fire team jumped through the blue explosion and down the ramp, all four clearing the doorway with milliseconds to spare before the barrier reformed behind them with a crackle of static electricity, the Commandos positioning themselves flat against both sides of the ramp and reforming instantly into their assault teams, knowing that someone _had_ _to_ have heard _that_ _explosion. The ramp they were on terminated a few meters down on a landing, which in turn led both left and right to two smaller ramps, directly into the combination control room and troop compartment. Fred, at point on the left side of the ramp glanced across at Li and made a hand signal, the two Spartans quickly pulling cylinders from their belts stepping forward in unison to throw them around the corners and down into the control room where they bounced off walls, floors and one somewhat annoyed Jackals head, before their two second fuse ran out and the Sonic grenades detonated.

To the Covenant troops caught in the detonations, it was as if for a moment all sound around them was taken away before being thrown back at them at once thousand times the intensity. A deep vibrating scream passed through the enclosed compartment, reflecting unmercifully off the metallic walls to blast into the ranks of Jackals and Grunts waiting in the deployment area just outside the twin ramps, the nearly two dozen troops simply falling where they stood, out of the fight.

The quartet of Elites at the front of the Scarab however were a different matter. Their shields rallied under the sudden blast of noise, refusing to let the sound waves pass through to manipulate the thin layer of air between the energy field on such an extreme level, all of them snapping around with whiplash speed and drawing weapons as the Spartans came down the left and right ramps.

Bolts of blue fire crisscrossed with tracers from MA5Bs as Li and Fred led the charge, pouring firepower into the faces of the lead Elites on each side facing them. Before their new shields had been installed in their armour, such a tactic could have best been described as 'risky' - even with the element of surprise on their side, but now he pressed forward fearlessly into the teeth of the Elites reflexive fire.

>Surprise was on their side and the Elites were completely off balance, taken aback by the sudden appearance of a quartet of Spartans inside their control room and their reactions showed it, more of their hastily aimed fire splashing across the walls of the compartment than the Spartans and before they could try and correct their aim, their shields collapsed and a hail of bullets tore their faces apart. As the opponents fell, Fred and Li sidestepped out of the way, allowing Grace and Joseph to leapfrog forwards as the remaining two Elites flinched away from the aggressive charge backed around the far side of the Bulkhead, the two Spartans pressing the advantage with M90 close quarters shotguns, as Fred spun around to cover the rear, ejecting his spent magazine.<p>

But even as Fred started to reach for a replacement magazine, he locked his gaze on a new threat. One of the Jackals in the pile of Jackals and Grunts the sonic grenades had neutralized was moving, somehow having managed to stay conscious and pitifully trying to push a Fuel Rod Cannon taken from the hands of one of the stunned Grunts next to him to point at him. The Jackal was clearly fighting to stay awake and aim the bulky weapon it was bracing across the body of another Jackal, but it didn't really _need _to aim with such a weapon. Even _with _full shields, Fred was not confident that his new armour would survive a direct hit from one of the anti-tank projectiles. And with his shields depleted from the necessary frontal assault...

Almost before the thought had entered his mind, Fred triggered a spring loaded compartment in the right pauldron of his armour. His empty rifle fell away as his right hand moved up, time seeming to slow and stretch out in the way Kelly called 'Spartan-Time' as his focus narrowed to the Jackal and its weapon, his hand catching the heavy combat knife ejected from his armour with the ease of long training, before he shifted his weight forward and snapped his arm down as the Jackals hand started to close on the trigger-

The Jackal didn't even cry out as the heavy blade crashed into -and _through_ - its head, sending the dead aliens corpse spinning away as the knife crashed into the aft bulkhead.

The roar of shotguns then traded with the hissing of plasma rifle fire before it all fell away as he retrieved his rifle, slapping in a fresh Magazine into place as calls of 'Clear!' echoed from behind the bulkhead, declaring that the Scarab was now free of hostile units.

He looked across at Li, who had likewise just finished reloading his own weapon and made a quick pair of hand gestures, the other nodding and moving out with him, the two Spartans carefully placing a single shot into the head of each Grunt or Jackal twitching unconscious or semi-conscious on the troop bay floor. To some, the cold blooded executions would appear to be little more than murder, but in the world the Spartans lived in, it was simple expediency. They had no capacity to take on prisoners, nor were they under any obligation to do so, and given all the times they had seen hoards of Grunts and Jackals tear cities worth of captured civilian prisoners apart in a frenzy of blood and gore for entertainment, they like most other UNSC personnel, were not exactly _interested_ in keeping Covenant personnel alive when not a mission objective.

Their grisly work was finished quickly enough and Fred turned, hurrying forward around the bodies of the Elites the Spartans were dragging out of the 'cockpit' of the walker, including one in the golden armour of a Zealot class Elite that he ignored for now, looking to see what he had to work with. A large rectangular holograph across the forward bulkhead provided an almost perfect exterior view, as if they were looking through a giant window around the front of the Scarab. The four Wraith Tanks supporting 'them' were highlighted with sensor tags and he could see they were now slowly reforming in front of the Scarab, although they remained oriented at the still burning tree line to the left. Further away, the lead Scarab had almost reached the ridgeline over which the Generator complex sat, needing only to climb and assume a good bombardment position from which it could wipe out the ODSs and Marines, leaving the Generator Complex wide open.

Which meant they had about a minute to figure this thing out.

"Li, Joseph, get upstairs with Malcolm and Vincent, prepare to engage the Wraiths" he verbally gave the first order he had given in some time, the Spartans nodding and hurrying back up top, pausing only to retrieve that former Jackals fuel rod cannon. Fred in turn took a seat at what he presumed to be the pilots station, running his eyes over the countless holographic controls projected around him.

All of the Spartans present had driven captured Banshees and Wraith Tanks before. Fred had even flown a Covenant Seraph once with Kelly ... but the Scarab was another level beyond even that. His suits systems did what they could, his HUD tagging translations on enough of the glyphs to at least get him oriented...but beyond that, there was an almost _instinctive_ feeling as he looked over the controls, almost a gut feeling that he knew what the buttons did.

>It was a feeling quite a few Spartans had commented about in their AARs after having used a Wraith or Banshee in the field, something that had reportedly driven Doctor Halsey to the edge of distraction trying to figure out. No conclusions had even been reached on the limited data, ONI ultimately dismissing it as some kind of exceptionally intuitive control and interface design, although Doctor Halsey suspected something much more interesting was going on.<p>

Whatever the truth, he didn't really have any choice but to trust this strange feeling, reaching for the icon that looked like the number 7 with an asterisks overlaying it.

"Nothing ventured..." he muttered under his breath, before he reached

out and tapped the button twice.

The Scarab rocked, hesitated, then with a clanking and humming, its front legs extended out again, raising the walker back to its full height and steadying it up as several lights flashed blue from red. In front of them, the four Wraith Tanks reformed into their escort positions, as Fred took a 'hold' of the prominent green holographic hemispheres to his left and right that looked much the same as those on a Wraith, took a deep breath and smoothly 'pushed' them forward as they turned blue... and his heart jumped as the Scarab smoothly started to move forward, the computers on board translating his relatively simple inputs into walking commands, the Wraith escort also getting underway ahead of him once again.

"Weapons status?" he asked, risking a quick glance at the other Scarab, feeling his heart sink as he saw it was busy hauling itself to the top of its ridgeline, its massive pincer-like 'feet' smashing into the cliff deeply enough with each stride to haul its fantastic bulk up the fifty degree slope, Freds faint hope that it would have to find another way around dying as it almost effortlessly seemed to ascend to its firing position.

"This appears to control the upper plasma cannon" Grace said, the intense concentration in her voice clear as she hesitantly moved her hands over several controls, a golden circle materializing on the HUD and moving back and forth as she did manipulated one hemisphere like control, similar to those Fred was using to drive the Scarab. "And this one should control...yes" she nodded, as a slightly larger green circle appeared, Fred feeling a shudder run through the Scarab as the partial armour plating around the main cannon pulled open like the petals of a flower and a rumble built under them, plasma lines heating in a manner similar to the much larger plasma cannons on capital ships as she settled the targeting circle over the other Scarab...

And nothing happened except a purple cross started flashing around the other Covenant walker.

"Safety interlock" Grace said, her voice calm but Fred for the first time heard the hint of tension in it as she rapidly looked over her controls, trying to find the override before the other Scarab achieved a firing position, Fred keeping his mouth shut in the knowledge that distracting her at this point could easily prove fatal.

Of course, as if to prove the old maxim true that it never rained but it poured, a window snapped open in the middle of the external view at that exact moment, a flashing red line connecting it to one of the Wraith Tanks visible in front of them. Inside the window was the image of an Elite in Scarlet armour, clearly manning the tank and speaking rapidly. Freds translation software caught enough to let him conclude the Elite was asking why they had just armed their weapons, before it appeared to do a double take at the screen, clearly seeing him and snarling out a single word that Fred did not need his software to translate for him, as it closed the channel.

_D__emons_.

"Red Team; weapons free" he ordered over TEAMCOM. Radio silence would

be useless from this point on and his command was rewarded by a salvo of Rockets and Fuel Rod projectiles streaking out from some point off screen above him to hammer into the thinner rear and top armour of the closest Wraith, the combined salvo breaching its armour and exploding the tank, whose commander was a second too slow off the mark. With commendable -if disappointing- swiftness however, the other three tanks ignited their booster systems and screamed ahead, clearly working to get out of range of the infantry before looking to do anything about the situation.

>Fred ignored them for now as Grace worked her controls ... and his heart leapt as the purple icon flashing around the other Scarab suddenly changed to a red box, the yellow circle seeming to suddenly 'stick' onto the rear of the other walker and hold steady as the Scarabs fire control systems locked the target.<p>

"I think that's it" Grace said, even as the other Scarab came to a halt on the top of the rise and started to shuffle around, clearly orienting itself to commence its artillery strike on the UNSC position. "Firing"

Dozens of tiny motes of light danced around the great maw of the Scarabs main cannon, ionized air illuminating in the night sky in a way that was almost beautiful if you were not on the receiving end of what came next. Milliseconds later a magnetic field formed as an invisible low powered laser pulse ionized the air between the two Scarabs ... and then a blinding blue stream of the stuff stars were made of arced across the kilometres wide gap to treacherously and mercilessly drill into the smaller of the two walkers.

While a powerful and well protected gun platform, the smaller Scarab had been designed for mass manufacture on the cheap, using cloned Lekgolo colonies instead of crews such as with the Spartans larger variant, with correspondingly less armour plating. While still a terrifying opponent that laughed at just about anything in the UNSC arsenal short of a heavy Air Strike, they were somewhat more vulnerable to attack if you could deliver the firepower, such as the weak armour that barely covered its oversized reactor core, centre rear.

The plasma burst smashed burned through the armour there like a blowtorch, plates of protection melting or spinning away from the awful firepower as it hungrily tore through the power conduits around the reactor before breaching the reactor itself, setting loose a second wave of plasma that had been about to be discharged against the ant like UNSC defenders it had placed under its guns. The white hot energy flooded out at once into every nook and cranny of the Scarabs interior, flash frying the Lekgolo worms in moments as clouds of blue plasma vomited from every opening and compartment as the secondary plasma cannon on the Scarabs roof exploded, to the stunned amazement of the ODSs watching.

>Then, almost comically, the Scarab toppled; rolling forward and crashing down the ridge with a thunder of noise, leaving fire and debris in its wake until it finally came to rest in the smoke filled valley.<p>

On its back.

With its legs in the air.

"Target eliminated" Grace said tonelessly, switching her attention to

the more immediate issue of the three closing Wraiths as they banked around malevolently, bringing their own Plasma Cannons to bear as they started to accelerate back down the clearing towards them, Grace prudently killing the main cannon and letting its armour plates snap shut to protect it. "Twenty seconds to recharge on the main gun".

"Target the right hand flanker with the secondary weapon" Fred ordered, tracking and pointing at the unit that had called in earlier, guessing it was the commander of the Tank platoon, as he brought the Scarab to a halt and tried to start backing it up as the Wraiths accelerated, spreading out to make themselves harder targets and ensure no one shot from the main gun could kill them all.

Grace instead opened fire with the secondary plasma cannon. Used more for anti-aircraft work than against ground targets, the chosen tank found itself bracketed by dozens of plasma rounds, many of which missed and blew steaming craters into the ground around it while others smashed into the tank itself, stippling it with dents and scorch marks as it rocked under the impacts. Its armour wasn't breached, but the sheer force of the impacts was sufficient to send it spinning out of control, the edge of the tank slewing into a sharp rise and flipping over, smashing back to the ground upside down, out of the fight for now. The other two tanks however didn't pause at the loss of their colleague, using the diversion of attention to accelerate down the hill and under the minimum depression of the secondary gun, the closer tank even contemptuously sidestepping an opportunistic fuel rod missile from one of the Spartans up top, Fred wondering if they were going to try ramming them for a second before he extrapolated their paths; one clearly aiming to pass directly under them, the other just outbound. Both were undoubtedly trying to get into their rear arc where dealing with them would become problematic, but before he could take action, Fred was confronted with a red targeting box being thrown around the outrider Tank, the control hemisphere under his left hand simultaneously flashing a bright red.

He didn't know exactly what that meant, but his reflexes were up to the task and he closed his palm into a fist anyway, as was the signal to activate such controls on Covenant vehicles, causing the left leg of the Scarab -which had been raised as the ungainly walker backpedalled - to slightly shift its aim and stab down as the walker came to a halt, straight into the top of the outboard Wraith.

>For a fraction of a second, the antigravity drive of the tank battled with the mass of the Scarab, before it predictably lost, and the leg skewered the vehicle, punching through to pin it to the ground. Seconds later, the Wraith was torn apart as the plasma cannons capacitors overloaded into the tank, the leg of the Scarab retracting with what looked like a rather charred paint job, but its structural integrity not damaged one wit.<p>

"Six O'Clock" Grace warned, nonplussed at the Scarab just squishing a tank under its legs as she tracked the last of the Wraiths, spinning the viewpoint around 180 degrees as the Wraith itself spun around, sending a ball of plasma crashing into the lower aft section of the Scarab and rocking the walker slightly. Its cannon, while intimidating enough to UNSC Tankers or Infantry, carried only a fraction the firepower of the Scarabs main gun, so its threat level was probably minimal against the far heavier armour on this

_Scarab.

Of course, there was also every chance the Covenant knew more about the weak spots of their own platforms than the UNSC did and so killing it sooner rather than later would be prudent. But _how_ to kill it was a more difficult question, given that the single tank in his rear could easily outmanoeuvre him with its anti-gravity drives, even in this narrow terrain...

>Even as he tried to come up with a plan, probably involving deploying his Spartans to try and flank it, or drive it away long enough for him to come around, the problem was solved rather unexpectedly.<p>

She came in a blur, all but materializing from the tree line behind the Wraith as it danced back and forth, throwing plasma salvos at them with every sign of enjoyment at their predicament. It didn't detect her until she was almost on top of it, but it reacted quickly when it did; firing its lateral booster thrusters and spinning away, working get away from the threat before coming around to deal with it.

And against anyone else, it might have well been fast enough to get clear.

It wasn't anything _like_ fast enough against Kelly.

She simply accelerated and overtook the desperately boosting Wraith like a Cheetah running down a hapless Springbok, leaping up and slamming into its aft section, next to the turret. The Wraith at once slammed to a halt and spun, before boosting off in the opposite direction rocking back and forth as it did so, but it was a useless attempt to shake her off as Kelly methodically worked her way forward until she reached the hatch. slamming her fist down with all the strength her power armour could generate into the centre of the metal.

And again.

And again.

And _again_.

Not even the alien alloys in the Covenant Tank could stand up to that level of force, the hatch finally buckled and twisted out of its frame. Seizing the edge in her gauntlet, Kelly pulled, tearing the edge back just enough to force a gap open in the frame as the tank started to wildly spin around like a demented top in a last ditch effort to throw her off. But it was a useless gesture as Kelly braced her legs and _jumped_, somersaulting backwards twice from the boost before sticking her landing so perfectly she would have won the Gold Medal at the Reach Summer Olympics as the grenade she had dropped into the crew compartment detonated, shredding the Elite and causing the suddenly dead stick Wraith to go spinning off into the tree line, rolling deeper and deeper into the forest.

"The rest of those Wraiths are coming back" Grace warned in her business as usual tone, swinging the display 180 degrees back to refocus up the long slope, the four Wraiths that had accompanied the lead Scarab barrelling back down the slope, probably in response to the call from the dead tanks for support, perhaps thinking that the

stationary Scarab had been either disabled or abandoned.
>Well either that or they were just playing to type; Elites were generally incapable of or unwilling to back down from a fight, even if they knew they couldn't win it. "Main cannon is recharged".<p>

"Wait until they reach one thousand meters, then kill them" Fred ordered, before switching back to TEAMCOM. "Nice job Kelly. Someone throw her a line and get her up here, we're not finished yet" he said, as he pulled up his TACMAP and started to plot their source from here. "We're not finished yet".

**0634 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>Anchor-1 Shipyard Complex, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System

The sixteen Longswords of Knife Squadron were perfectly silent as they shifted into a loose formation that would let them cover each other in the expected dogfight to come, yet the silence was not imposed by any order from Fleet Command, nor was it the result of Covenant signal interference.
>It was simply because they knew there was an excellent chance they would all be dead shortly, and each in their own way was busy steeling themselves for the possibility of what lay ahead.<p>

Knife One-Two quietly thought of his Squadron around him. Good people, friends all. Some he had fought alongside for years, others were new transfers barely a month into the squadron and fresh out of flight school. But young and old, all of them were dead people flying, their wheels would not be going back down later today.

Knife One-Four silently bore witness that there was no God but Allah, and Mohammad was His messenger, commending his soul to Allah as he prepared to die in defence of his world and his people; a warrior in the Jhiad that had been declared decades ago when the Covenant had declared in turn their own holy war on humanity.

Knife One-Eight thought calmly of his Parents and Sisters, dead these long five years under the hellish caracaras of a Glassing beam. And then he thought of causing pain to those who had taken them from him, relishing the opportunity once again to kill Covenant pilots and soldiers in large numbers until he could kill no more.

The pilot of Knife Two-Six, barely out of flight school down on Reach just tried to force her hands to stop shaking, trying to keep her focus on the targets that had been designated by the local command ship, and not on the chaos of the massive dogfight raging through the shipyards above them, explosions silently consuming dozens of lives a second, knowing in her heart that in her first combat mission she would be joining the very long list of the dead in this war, the sheer scale of the massive battle between the fleets staggering her as she swung her head around, seeing explosions from horizon to horizon as defender and attacker laid into each other with quarter neither asked for nor expected.

Then the silence was shattered in the worst possible way.

"Knife Lead, Knife One-Six" one of the pilots called in, the strictly 'All Business' tone not quite removing the dread the words brought up to everyone listening. "Contact, tally two-zero plus Seraphs. Nose,

two hundred clicks and closing"

"Copy that One-Six. All flights, go weapons and sensors hot. First Squadron, engage by flights. Second Squadron, prepare to mow through and go after the primary targets. Watch your spacing, check your six. Good hunting, out".

Lieutenant Commander Justine Richards switched off her COM link as tightened her straps, deciding not to insult her people with glib comments about seeing them on the other side or demanding the person with the fewest kill counts buy everyone else drinks back on Reach. She, and they, all knew full well that the odds of them being alive more than an hour from now were ... limited. As such, she had made the decision to take second seat this time out, despite her status as one of the best Longsword drivers in the 4th Fleet. She could do better by her people watching over them and the battle ... and as she strove to make sense of the incredible clutter across her tactical board, she was damn well glad she had.

This was the biggest battle she had ever seen in a _very _long war.

Above them for a thousand kilometres in any direction, were a clutter of shipyards, space stations, orbital refineries, cargo depots and holding pens that made up the Anchor-1 complex, the biggest shipyards in the UNSC. In the middle of it all was Gamma Station, a massive ring three kilometres in diameter. Normally spinning sedately, it was frozen and dark now, illuminated only by the discharging lasers of the five remaining Covenant capital ships in the area around it, hoards of Seraphs and Phantoms with the occasionally Banshee unit fighting fiercely to keep anyone from getting to the station, as the UNSC craft equally furiously worked to eliminate any more enemy reinforcements from getting to it.

Knife Squadrons job was equally straight forward.

>If the Spartans on Gamma Station failed their mission, their mission was to destroy it.<p>

She and her unit had been holding in low orbit, part of the final line of defence fighters ready to be unleashed if - when - elements of the Covenant fleet started to break through the main battle line and made a move on Reach. Her Longsword and that of her second unit leader Lieutenant Mike Cortez each carried a pair of Shiva fusion bombs that could take out a Covenant Corvette or Frigate, and at least blow down the shields of anything up to a CCS class starship, giving their Medusa Missile packs and heavier AGSM-10 missiles at least a fighting chance to do real damage, or at least tie up the enemy long enough for support to arrive.

>But that planned had been thrown out, with a retask order to be prepared to blow up one of their own space stations with their nuclear ordinance, as nothing less could guarantee the NAV database the Covenant were trying to capture would be eliminated without any chance of salvage.

That using the nukes would shut down the orbital guns for at least half an hour and probably guarantee the fall of Reach was understood by all concerned, but against the possibility of the Covenant getting a roadmap to every human world, even that sacrifice was the lesser of two evils if the Spartans failed. So she was under orders to be prepared to make the call to destroy the station, if it seemed

necessary.

But she didn't want to be responsible for making that call! Didn't want to be responsible for sacrificing one world to save others!

And so as the Covenant fighters closed in, breaking apart and accelerating individually as was their preference for single combat, Justine Richards closed her eyes and silently prayed to a God she didn't really believe in after ten years of war, begging just this _once_ to step in, to stop her from having to condemn an entire world.

And for the first time in a long time, someone listened.

A MISSILE WARNING alarm sounded in her ears, and she snapped her eyes open, just in time for a hoard of missiles to streak by her cockpit, faint exhaust trails arcing downrange toward the red icons superimposed on her HUD, as the first flickering of plasma fire lanced out towards them.

>She clenched her jaw as she saw the wasted salvo of missiles streak downrange towards the Covenant fighters, even as she wondered what idiot hadn't set their IFF up properly and caused her EW systems to throw a fit. The missiles would probably not even track at this extended range and whichever idiot had fired them...

Her anger at the waste of ordinance fell off however, first to mild surprise and then to astonishment as the missiles cleanly acquired the lead enemy elements and weaved towards them on her tactical board. In response, the Covenant ships ceased their speculative long range shots as they elected to manoeuvre, breaking off into sidesteps that should easily force the small missiles to overshoot.

They were rudely surprised then when the missiles in turn shifted track, cutting the corner almost before the fighters had moved and slammed into them, tearing the heart out of the enemy squadron with explosions far greater than a Medusa salvo had any right to cause. One missile she watched actually overshoot its target, but it simply turned around without losing velocity to slam into its targeted Seraph, neat as you please!

"What in the _hell_..." she started to demand, only for a voice to suddenly break in over the top of her.

"Contacts! Six O'clock - Christ, they're right on top of us!"

Justine didn't know who had yelled out the panicked contact report - although from the high pitched voice and lack of RT discipline, she would have put money on it being Knife Two-Six, but she did see a rash of yellow UNKNOWN contacts suddenly appear on her board, approaching with her formation, merging with it-

And with a scream that she heard somehow even through the vacuum of space, a wave of dark black shapes streaked past.

They were small craft, tiny compared to her Longsword, probably about the same size as those Sabers she had heard about on FLETCOM running around causing merry hell for the Covenant, but these were clearly _not_ _YSS-1000's. They were angular, with forward swept wings and a trio of engines centre rear, twin tails and moving like nothing she

had ever seen before. Her unit was at full standard thrust, and nothing that small should have been able to match their acceleration .. but whatever they were, these fighters were overtaking them with almost contemptuous ease.

Even as she watched dumbfounded, a second missile Salvo rippled from the lead fighters, a half dozen missiles all but leaping off their rails, which curved away at a breathtaking speed, heading for the remaining Covenant fighters. The Elites piloting the Seraphs scattered in all three dimensions as the second salvo bore in at them, going to full throttle and conceding the field in a desperate -and mostly futile- attempt to survive, clearing the immediate area of any hostile craft.

>Then, space...changed.<p>

It was the best description she could make, words like 'distorted', or 'shimmered' or 'blurred' just didn't seem to match the reality of what had been perfectly empty space directly above her changing to no longer be empty, replaced by a grey starship of a class she had never seen before that was following the tiny fighters through the new gap in the Covenant perimeter towards Gamma Station at similar speeds.

"Everyone, change of plans" she ordered over the squadron channel, feeling a sudden surge of hope as her sensor board went wild with track changes as Covenant fighters broke away from the larger dogfight to interpose themselves between the new threat and their capital ships around Gamma Station, the newcomer and its fighters in turn shifting their own course slightly to intercept them while still maintaining their ridiculous high speed path towards the massive ring in the distance. "Hit the throttle and follow these guys in, I think we might just have ourselves a new ballgame!"

0632 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /

>UNSC _**Trafalgar**_**, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System**

"I know full well what it isn't" Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb said with no small degree of exasperation to the tiny holographic figure at the edge of his command station as he stormed around his bridge in frustration. "What I want to know is what it is!"_

"I am afraid I do not have that information Admiral" the small blue figure said with an almost invisible shrug. "I've run every database I can think of, there is no record of anything like it in the UNSC inventory, not in the fleet, nor in ONI databases Cortana, uh, 'Acquired' and passed on to me"

"Which doesn't mean that it never existed in those databases" the Admiral pointed out, running a hand over his shaved head as he studied his screens, most of which were showing wireframe diagrams or sensor replays of the unknown ship that had just shown up and blown a Covenant Super Cruiser into a debris field like it was a mild irritant, after laughing at its best efforts that should have killed it ten times over. "We cleared out most of Section IIIs black projects, but we haven't accounted for all their resources or people as yet".

Including James Ackerson the Admiral didn't add, but thought it

none the less.

The man had not _precisely_ done anything _wrong_ while attached to ONI - at least as the shadowy organization defined 'right' and 'wrong' compared to the rest of mankind - but he had tap-danced along the edge, and mysteriously vanished just before the massive shakeup of ONI had taken place. Some thought he had simply decided to go off and fight his own private war against the Covenant with his own backers, others that he had too much information in his head that could be used to incriminate -or blackmail- ONI higher ups, so they had taken the opportunity to assassinate him as part of a plan to pin everything nasty Section III had ever done on him to keep their own hands clean.

>Personally, Whitcomb didn't believe either was true, but if it was him in some kind of super secret ONI super ship he promised himself that he would be lenient and ensure he was given the Medal of Honor _before_ he let the firing squad open up for withholding such incredible technology from the fleet...

The bridge of the _Trafalgar_, pride of the UNSC fleet, was appropriately large and equipped with the finest technology. Dozens of officers and enlisted ranks manned stations scattered across the room, a constant chattering of communications and orders flowing as the massive carriers tactical staff coordinated the battle waging through Anchor-1, as others kept tabs on the main Covenant fleet via the network of Clarion spy drones Keyes had thoughtfully deployed after their mystery ship had shown up and then vanished. His command station sat elevated in the centre of the room, countless tactical readouts and displays around him at waist height letting him manage the battle with the help of Arthur, his personal AI of several years now. Taking the form of an ancient Knight in plate armour, the AI was invaluable in helping him manage the dataflow of a battle stretching across such a massive volume of space ... even if like most AI's he knew, it could get a bit full of itself at times.

"If I may ask Sir" his AI continued diffidently as he took his seat, "this unknown is clearly helping us, why are you so concerned about it?"

"Because I'm trying to run a battle to save the second most critical world in the UNSC from an enemy that outnumbers me three to one, and isn't behaving like they normally do" the other growled as he issued orders with a tap on a screen for the next Longsword wave from the _Trafalgars_ flight deck to push into the Shipyards and continue slowly squeezing the Covenant forces therein to death, wincing slightly as he saw the casualty statistics update with the latest loss counts for the fighters, even as he sent yet more good people to their deaths. "And I don't have time to deal with rogue ships that don't answer to me" he finished explaining, before shifting topics. "What's the status groundside of my defence guns?"

"Wellesley reports the ODSTs are handling it" Arthur relayed the data after a second of digital chatter passed back and forth between the two AIs. "Two Spartan teams have eliminated Covenants LZs and it looks like a third group have borrowed a Covenant Scarab, used it to kill another one, and are currently having a jolly old drive in the country while shooting most of it up, so the Generators are secure for now".

"Good" the Admiral replied, fighting the smile that threatened to

work its way onto his face at the thought of a Spartan team casually hijacking over the Covenant's most powerful ground weapons platform and turning it back against their owners, sitting back and studying the tactical display for the orbital battle instead, wishing things were as straight forward up here as down there.

>The Covenant were playing this battle with something he had never seen before; subtlety. It was a word he rarely associated with the Covenant, but over the last few engagements they had acted with surprising levels of deception and misdirection in place of their normal brute force approach. At Sigma Octanus IV the Covenant had used deception, misdirection and diversion to hide some kind of groundside intelligence gathering mission before leaving the system, even though the UNSC fleet had been on the ropes.
So what was their purpose here?

That was the question. It was only a gut feeling ... but it was none the less a _strong_ feeling to him that the Covenant wanted Reach as intact as possible, hence their reluctance to follow standard procedure and simply bull through irrespective of losses, break the orbital defences and start glassing as they had on a hundred worlds over the last twenty years. Their tactics seemed to be less about attacking Reach so much as eliminating its defenders and leaving the planet entirely to themselves, without any interference.

>He would wager every cent in next year's military budget that their infiltration force had been sent in to find something very specific, but had been discovered and destroyed before they could finish searching, and that this fleet had been called in to help finish the job. What they were looking for, he didn't have the first clue, but he knew that it could only be a bad thing for the UNSC if they found it.

Whatever their esoteric goals, the solution to dealing with this invasion was gratifyingly straight forward; kill them all and let their damn heathen Gods sort them out.

"Damage to Anchor One?"

"Approximately twenty percent of slipways destroyed or damaged beyond repair, another forty percent have taken some degree of damage " the sensor officer to his right called out in response to his question.

Whitcomb winced slightly at the report. Still, the loss of shipyards would be painful, even _if_ he held Reach, but the loss of the NAV data would be catastrophic. He would have moved -what was left of- the fleet in to deal with the situation, but with the shipyards halfway around the planet, the main Covenant fleet no doubt would have moved quickly to intercept him if he tried to make the move, only his fighters were small enough and fast enough to make a difference, but not attract the attention of the enemy fleet. >Even so, he was quickly running out of time. He would give the Spartans every second he could possibly afford, but unless they signalled mission accomplished soon-<p>

"Admiral" his tactical officer suddenly yelled out from across the bridge, causing him to snap his neck around, "they're back!"

Whitcomb bit off a Russian curse that made his AI off to the side

wince slightly.

"Where?"

"Anchor One" the officer replied, the main screen that dominated the front of the bridge switching to a 3D tactical display, a highlighted yellow icon with a cloud of smaller icons around it materializing just past the designator for Knife Squadron, a rash of red icons in their path losing resolution and vanishing as they were swatted out of the way by impressively accurate missile fire.

"It's not alone this time" Arthur added, raising a palm, on top of which a wireframe of a small craft materialized, which he tossed off to the side almost negligently, the holographic generators inside the Admirals command area materializing it as if it had been thrown across to him, the wireframe spinning around in front of the Admiral slowly. "Some kind of fighter is with them and it's the devil to track; they appear to be equipped with some kind of stealth technology. Even data linking everything together from a dozen sensors in real time, even _I_ can barely make out more than a vague outline".

"Unknown ships, unknown fighters..." Whitcomb muttered, dismissing the small but lethal looking fighter with a gesture, returning his eyes to the main screen as the wedge of yellow icons approached the main Covenant force around the station. The Admiral and more than a few other people on the ships holding in formation watched in fascination as the unknown closed in on Gamma Station, a large wave of Phantoms and Seraphs breaking from their shadow boxing with the Longswords to push towards the unknown, as the lead Covenant Capital ship moving in behind them discharged its plasma torpedoes towards it. "Would _anyone_ like to tell me what the _hell_ is going on here in _my_ _engagement?'"

0632 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /**
>USS Odyssey, Anchor-1 Shipyards, Epsilon Eridani
System

"Enemy is locking us up, detecting thermal build-ups along their lateral hull, looks like they are getting ready to fire".

"Hold course" Landry ordered as he stared out the window. The bridge HUD had been activated, a holographic overlay over the windows marking enemy and friendly targets, with orange targeting boxes around the enemy capital ships and tiny orange dots for the enemy support craft heading in. "Let them take the first shot".

Ahead out and window and magnified on the main screen to his left, the Covenant ships slowed and turned, presenting their broadside as a red glow built up steadily along their flanks. Only one ship fired, which told Landry something about the Covenant's OODA loop then and there given what they had 'just' done to that Covenant Super Cruiser, three balls of flame collecting on the lead ship's hull before leaping off, leaving a faint trail as they stabilized, accelerating smoothly into a curve around several shipyards in the way to streak unerringly for them.

"Punch through, steady as she goes" Landry ordered, deciding to see what these Covenant weapons were made of at full shields before they went any further into this engagement. Carter _said_ _they_ shouldn't

be a threat, but such claims had a way of going wrong at the worst possible time...

>The three balls of plasma fanned out around the course of Odyssey like an opening hand for a few seconds, before the Covenant gunners realized their quarry was not trying to evade, the bolts slowing and then spiraling inwards, twisting around and around each other until they slammed into the shields of the _Odyssey_ as one, with remarkable precision and co-ordination.

The effect was...underwhelming.

"Damage?" Landry inquired as the red cloud around the windows faded quickly to nothing.

"Minimal" Carter reported with a shake of her head. "Some shield loss, they are already firming back up".

>It didn't surprise Landry too much; the Asgard had designed their defensive systems to take on an enemy who used a wide variety of vastly more exotic energy weapons than the Covenant had ever dreamed of after all.
"Their primary weapons are quite a bit less powerful than their energy projector was, with the ZPM tied into our power grid, short of a massed salvo from large numbers of ships, Plasma salvos won't be much of a threat".

"Good to know" Landry said with a nod. "Let's step this up to the next level and see what reaction overwhelming firepower brings".

"Targets locked" Carter acknowledged as she worked her board. "Firing".

Much like their shield technology, so too were the Asgard's Plasma Beam Weapons the final generation of technology developed in the eternal struggle to build weapons to effectively fight the Replicators, as the bugs consumed the Asgard's technology and turned it against them, spurring them on to create more sophisticated, destructive and impressive means to trying to hold the line against their mortal enemy.

>Landry didn't have any real understanding of how the weapons worked, vague explanations from Carter about phased hyperspace states of directed energy streams had mostly gone over his head ... but he knew what they could do, and that was more than enough for him as a brilliant white/blue beam lanced out towards the enemy ship.

The beam once again almost effortlessly passed through the enemy shields and through the hull, the damage highly localized ... but when that locale was the main fusion core, it was more than enough as a huge wave of plasma exploded back out, detonating the aft third of the enemy warship and sending the forward thirds, on fire and out of control, spinning away from the combat zone, wreathed in a cloud of breached atmosphere and plasma.

Credit where it was due, the stunned Shipmasters on the two Frigates had started to react almost at once to the impossible sight of a human ship laughing off their plasma torpedoes and almost casually obliterating a Destroyer, firing their Repulsor engines and shifting course, but at this range it was a pointless exercise as fire lanced out again from the _Odyssey_, slicing into both Frigates amidships, snapping the spines of the smaller ships whole and leaving this time only chunks of wreckage as the ships were consumed by secondary

explosions.

"Good shooting" Landry said approvingly, a thin smile on his lips at the sheer power of these new weapons making him wish the Asgard had given it to them earlier, but grateful that in the end they had given it to them none the less. "Reaction?"

"I think that just got their attention, that wave of Covenant strike craft are accelerating - and more squadrons are breaking off from the battle and following them in" Carter replied as she studied the sensor returns. "It looks like the entire Covenant strike craft line is reorienting on us, except for those smaller fighters moving around the surface of the station".

"Not the heavier ships?" Landry frowned slightly and Carter shook her head.

"No Sir, they are staying near the station ... in fact they appear to be moving closer to the station, behind it and out of our line of sight".

"Smart move" he admitted grudgingly. "They're playing for time, trying to stall us with overwhelming numbers of targets while their teams finish up getting the database - they clearly consider themselves expendable for the sake of the mission ... but we're not going to play that game. Cooper, turn the 302's loose. Carter, activate all railguns and stand by. Marks?"

"Sir?" the other asked, although he didn't take his eyes off his console

"Take is right through the enemy fighters to Gamma Station. Shortest route, and don't spare the ion drive".

"Yes Sir" the other said with a grin, sliding the throttle forward.

****0634 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>F-302 Red Flight, Anchor-1 Shipyards, Epsilon Eridani System

"Well this just got interesting" Cameron Mitchell reflected as the Odyssey accelerated, the General played a game of Chicken with ten billion dollars worth of Battle Cruiser at the wave of Covenant fighters burning towards her. Stuttering streams of tracers blasted out from her railgun mounts Carter 'plowed the road', making any position direction ahead of her a very unhealthy place to be for friend or foe right now. "It looks like we have, oh, sixty or so enemy craft inbound?"

"I would say closer to eighty Colonel Mitchell" the ever dour voice of Teal'c put in from behind him.

"So eighty against sixteen of us ... sound a little unfair to you T?"

"They do indeed appear to be over-confident" Teal'c deadpanned from behind him as he studied his boards. "They are closing and will be in weapons range in twenty seconds".

"Alright people you heard the man" Mitchell said as his radar painted a picture of the Phantoms in the lead of the enemy formation. "Lock up your bandits, go to full throttle and stand by to break inside - outside on my mark ... mark!"

The sixteen F-302s kicked their throttles forward and jumped ahead like scalded cats, blasting past the Odyssey and closing on the swarm of enemy ships. The torrent of rail gun fire was forcing them out of the ships direct path and heading them into the F-302s defence zone, but there was still every chance that they were fanatical enough to try and ram the ship from the side. The F-302's job was to aggressively push forward and deny the enemy a chance to gather any kind of real momentum in an attack run on the Odyssey, but they had limited ordinance and numbers which would mean this attack would have to be carefully timed. The back seaters in the Interceptors worked together, their fire control systems swapping data to spit out shoot lists and lock in distinct targets with every one of the 302s, eliminating the risk of two fighters going after the same target with their few remaining missiles.

The pilots might get all the glory, but it was the guy or girl in the back seat who did the real work.

Everyone knew that.

Well, except the pilots of course.

"Target Acquired" was all Teal's said as he finished his work, Mitchell releasing his safety lock as two green boxes materialized around two of the the rapidly growing dots on his HUD, a buzzing tone sounding in his ear as the missiles confirmed a lock. He waited a half second longer to close the range just a tad before his thumb pressed the launch button, holding it in for the requisite two seconds it took for his fire control systems to decide that he really did want to launch his missiles and made the call.

"Shaft, Fox Four Two".

A torrent more launch calls followed at almost the same time as thirty two missiles rippled from the sixteen F-302s and streaked downrange.

Externally identical to AIM-120 AMRAAMs, these were certainly no normal Slammer missiles. The standard blast-fragmentation warhead designed to shred relatively weak human aircraft had been pulled out and replaced by a high explosive variant enhanced with elementary Naquadah, giving the missile equivalent firepower of a half dozen Tomahawk Cruise Missiles for starters, giving it the punch to get through lightly shielded craft like Al'Kesh, or take out a discrete point target on a large ship like a. Raytheon had also rebuilt the solid rocket engine with a miniaturized version of the inertial manipulation technology the F-302 itself used to let it actually manoeuvre and fly through space with great agility and while it couldn't make the same level of Delta-V changes while holding its inertia that the F-302's themselves could, against Death Gliders or Darts armed with visually targeted fixed energy weapons it had been proven more than effective enough.

And so it was again now.

The missile swarm tore into the centre of the Covenant formation with a vengeance, indifferent to the facts that they were unknown alien targets from a completely different universe. Their human masters had told them 'KILL', their fire control agreed they were valid targets and so like happy little puppies that were both eager to please and utterly mindless, the missiles did their work, pointing themselves at the contacts and letting the sensor return grow and grow and grow on their logic boards...

The Brutes piloting the heavily shielded craft had scoffed at the idea that a human missile launched from a fighter _that _small would do anything but bounce off their shields as was generally the case, ignoring the warnings shouted from the Elites in the Seraphs as they prepared to start bombarding the enemy capital ship...

They paid for their presumption several seconds later as a series of enormous explosions tore through the heart of the Covenant formation and wiped almost all of the bombers out.

Again, shocked at the unprecedented effectiveness of the human missiles, the remaining Covenant fighters returned fire, a veritable storm of blue and red energy bolts saturating the area of space that should have contained the loose F-302 formation, but the 302s had already kicked in their heavy rocket boosters, streaking through the explosions of the Phantoms and the hole it had created in the Covenant formation, holding course for several seconds before half each moved into split-S and Immelmann turns, reversing their course and opening up their own formation as they broke into wing pairs, slashing for the flanks of the Covenant fighter force and rippling off another missile salvo as they closed to gun range, manoeuvring at speeds that caught the Covenant completely off guard as they tried to reform with far more awkward manoeuvrers.

Rail gun fire crisscrossed with plasma fire for several seconds as the Covenant units started to come about and tried to adjust to their foes incredible speed, even as another dozen and a half died to missile hits, abandoning their attack run on the _Odyssey_ less for the glory of one on one fighter combat and more for reasons of pure survival. Two of the F-302s were hit as they ran the gauntlet of plasma to get inside the enemy formation, one shrugging off the loss of armour and shredding the Seraph that had made the hit, the other however was turned into a flaming comet as its fuel line was blown, a veteran Squadron Master killing his targeting systems and going to manual gunnery; relying on his instincts as opposed to his sensors to line up and fire, bracketing the 302 with lines of fire as it turned and tearing into the crafts underside.

"Blue Six, eject!" Mitchell yelled as he rolled through a barrage of plasma fire trying to get a line on him, concentrating on staying evasive as he watched the other F-302 start to try and break off, before a quartet of fighters detonated it with a withering barrage of fire that clearly could only have set off the fuel tanks on board.

Swearing, Mitchell rolled right again and dove, a hail of blue bolts shooting through where he had just been as he followed his wingman who he had given the lead, combining with him to drill cannon fire into a Seraph, the four railguns blowing through its shields and shredding the craft before they broke off, neither of the F-302

pilots stupid enough to fly straight and level in a dogfight for more than three seconds at a time, especially with a bunch of pissed off Elites on their six. In theory, being in the middle of the enemy with far more craft _should_ make them much more cautious in shooting, for fear of hitting a friendly craft. It had after all been a proven tactic used successfully in the massive aerial battles of World War Two when dealing with large bomber waves ...

... but then, neither the Axis nor the Allies had been equipped with shields that would let them survive at least a few shots from a 'friend' made in haste, a difference that to Mitchells annoyance had rendered the tactic rather less effective than he had anticipated. This was a mistake, decelerating to fight inside their formation had robbed them of their speed-

And the fighters sticking to his tail were getting dangerously annoying and more accurate.

"There are eight enemy fighters behind us" Teal'c said in the tone he would use equally for ordering lunch and declaring the end of the world was neigh. "In tight formation and closing, trying to hit us with massed fire".

"Oh, good" Cameron commented dryly, glancing at the rear sensor display and making a quick calculation. "I've always wanted to try this; Sheppard tells me it's a whole lot of fun".

And with that, the Colonel slammed the throttle back.

Obediently, the F-302s inertial field fed back upon itself, bringing the fighter to near a relative stop inside two seconds. The Seraph fighters behind him blew past almost before they saw him, two barely missing ramming the F-302 as they passed bare meters away from each other. A heartbeat later he slammed the throttle forward again and triggered his last two missiles, both of which leapt off the rails eagerly, barely needing to make even a minor course change before they detonated in two of the Seraphs dead ahead, the explosion destroying several others and sending the rest spinning out of control, Cameron using the break to turn away and move to rejoin his wingman-

-just in time for another alarm to sound as a pair of Seraphs swung in from his 3 O'clock high, weapons blazing as they came.

Rolling to present a minimal profile, he kicked his rudder pedals and slewed around out of the line of fire, bringing his nose on target and triggering a quick burst from his cannons. He grimaced slightly as the hastily aimed fire simply bounced off their shields, the Seraphs tightening their turns to track him as they moved closer-

Then they blew up.

A quartet of Longswords streaked through the explosion, rocketing past Mitchell with a surprising grace that belayed the fact that they were bigger than a Boeing 767, falling upon another flight of the Seraphs without mercy, all guns blazing. Their cannons fired at a slower fire rate than the F-302s rail guns, but given that they were using calibres that were only used back on Earth in Main Battle Tanks it was a moot point as Covenant fighters shattered as swarms of UNSC

fighters that had been ignored in favour of the threat of the Odyssey made the Covenant pay dearly for their mistake, flights of disciplined fighters ganging up on the scattered and off balance Seraphs and methodically working to pick them off.

"All fighters, disengage and reform on _Odyssey_" Mitchell ordered as the battle swiftly moved towards its logical conclusion, using his speed to disengage with the rest of the F-302s. A few Seraphs took parting shots, but found themselves rapidly on the defensive as they were in turn jumped by UNSC fighter craft, Mitchell using the break in short, sharp engagement to assess the squadron wider status report on one of his secondary screens, frowning at what he saw.

The good news was that only Blue Six's F-302 icon was black, although three more were now red and four yellow, and almost every single one of them was showing ordinance depletion warnings meaning they had just about reached the end of their combat effectiveness. Still, they had lasted just long enough to do their job and efficiently eliminated most of the Covenant fighter strength in the area. And if _Odyssey_ could deal with the last of the enemy warships...

"_Odyssey_, Blue Leader, we are at Winchester status, fighter threat neutralized, down one bird. How copy?" Mitchell thumbed his hotlink as he ran his eyes over the wider sensor readouts, mostly filled with datalink information from the _Odysseys_ vastly more capable systems. Their attacks combined with those from the Longswords had all but swept the Covenant fighter units in the Shipyards and cost them the core capital ship support they had here, what little remained of them reforming directly around Gamma Station in a final defence to buy time for their boarding parties.

"Blue Leader copy all" Megan Cooper replied from the bridge of the _Odyssey_, some static hissing into the link as the other ships shields were repeatedly slammed with laser fire from the last Covenant warships backing away towards Gamma station that might have just been starting to get an idea of how precarious their situation was. "Be advised, we got the crew from Blue Six, they're a little toasty but good. Orders are to stay clear until we finish these ships, we'll meet for recovery and phase three at point Delta. How copy?"

"Solid Copy Odyssey, out" Mitchell agreed before switching frequencies. "Alright people, reform on me. We're bugging out to Point Delta" Cameron relayed the order, waiting until Teal'c brought up the course on his navigational display before banking and pulling into a climb away from the massive web of space stations that made up the shipyard complex, engaging the auto-pilot as the remaining F-302 fell into formation around him. "The good news is that Oveur and Murdock were both beamed clear by _Odyssey_ before they blew up, meaning they didn't get out of buying everyone a nights worth of drinks next time we hit Vegas. As soon as the Odyssey clears the final enemy ships, we'll recover".

And he silently thought as clicked off the channel, _we pray that for the Covenants sake, they understand the message we just sent and get the hell out of here before 'Phase Three' becomes necessary._

0630 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /

>Alpha Team AO, Orbital Defence Generator Facility A-331, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System

"I can't see anything immediately on the other side of the barrier" Anton's report came over the SECURECOM channel from the Spartan crouching on their side of the massive active camouflage field that encompassed what Fred suspected was something bigger than a simple Covenant LZ. "I can still see and hear a lot of activity down the line, closer to the river, but the tree line is too dense to get a visual from here" .

"Copy" Fred replied as he considered the situation, glancing at the sensor readouts on the control board. According to the Scarabs sophisticated sensors - at least if he was reading them correctly - the area for fifty kilometres ahead of them was clear, without any sign of the artificial light or activity Anton had just reported seeing with his own eyes. Happily, this strange sensor confusing field appeared to work both ways, the Spartan commenting that the Scarab itself had vanished when he had moved past the barrier and looked backwards, which gave Fred both hope that the Covenant had not noticed the destruction of their attack force as yet, or at least not noticed the hijacking of the walker platform.

"Anton, get back here" he ordered after a moment's thought, deciding that it was time to be decisive. "Everyone else get inside, we're proceeding forward as a friendly Covenant Scarab into the field. Communications silence from this point on".

>Blue acknowledgement lights winked at him as the Spartans standing watch on the top deck helped Anton back on board before heading inside, having disposed of all the Covenant bodies inside and outside the Scarab by the simple expedient of throwing them off the side several minutes ago, leaving no external sign that the Scarab was no longer under Covenant control.<p>

The massive walker shuddered through the Active Camouflage barrier little more than a slight humming sound and ripple of light on the screen, the distant glow over the tops of the trees Anton had spoken of painting onto the screen almost at once before the view screen tilted almost sickeningly downwards as the Scarab worked down a drop in the terrain. The internal artificial gravity field negated any sensation of tilting or movement, something Fred found slightly disquieting as they clambered down what was easily a forty degree slope, the Scarab happily smashing its legs deep into the ground to provide purchase before reaching somewhat level ground and marching forward back along the path of destruction it and its 'brother' had smashed through the forest in the other direction a while ago.

Grace remained at the weapons console next to him with the rest of the Spartans crowding to the left and right where they could watch the screen, excepting Joseph and Li who were watching the doorway from behind the shield to make sure no-one tried to retake the Scarab. It made things rather tight up here, but Fred understood their need to see what was going on outside as they retraced the Scarabs steps.

"We're coming up on a clearing" Li put in, as he overlaid the satellite recon data that Cortana had scrounged up on his HUD, pinpointing their position on the map and making several quick calculations. "It's probably the only realistic LZ in the area,

without resorting to glassing one anyway".

"Makes sense" Fred agreed as he stepped the Scrab carefully around a minor hill and approached what he guessed would be the final turn in to their deployment zone, accelerating slightly as he started to come around the corner, the blue glow getting much stronger now. "Let's see what we've got here..."

The clearing was larger than he had anticipated as he stepped around the corner and halted. It was sprinkled somewhat sparsely with trees that had lost most of their leaves, but it was mostly open ground with the Big Horn River backstopping it a few kilometres away. In this open area, a vast encampment of Covenant personnel had made themselves right at home on Reach's soil, something that irrationally made Fred feel a spike of anger that he instantly suppressed. A line of white dome shaped tents he recognized as airtight quarters for the methane breathing grunts, with a smaller number of far more elaborate golden polyhedral huts that Elites used mixed in were clustered in concentric rings around a grounded Covenant SDV-class Corvette - although at second glance, Fred noticed some interesting modifications that appeared to borrow from the much smaller DAV-class Stealth Corvettes. Its hull was not the burnished silver and purples of a typical Covenant warship, but a dull non reflective material that blended in with the environment around it.

>Above it, stabbing into the sky, was a large spire that looked almost identical to the one NOBEL Team had destroyed days ago that had been hiding the Long Night of Solace and its deployment zone - clearly this was the source of the ECM field that was hiding all of this from orbital or air detection.<p>

The entire encampment was ringed with guard towers, small platforms hovering above the ground that Jackal snipers manned, with a number of Shade turrets intermixed between them. The blue trails of Ghosts were clearly moving around the perimeter on patrol, and the whole area was alive with Covenant activity. A forward entry control point blocked off this trail that led up into the base, with a pair of Shade cannons backstopping a line of portable hexagonal shields, behind which Grunts and Jackals were leaping to their feet as the monster came around the corner and halted.

The sheer scale of the encampment momentarily staggered Fred as it became plainly obvious from the sheer amount of construction that it must have been here for quite some time. This could not _possibly_ have been part of the force that had snuck by the fleet only hours ago - this had to be something left over from the initial infiltration unit that the Covenant had moved to _reinforce_ with the new landings.

>To be sure, when the Generators had come online the Covenant had no doubt decided to take out the target of opportunity, but it couldn't be their primary objective if they had been here this long.<p>

So what was?

As far as he knew, as he zoomed out the map for a wider look at the AO, there wasn't anything for fifty kilometres in any direction except Castle Base, ONI Section III's HQ on Reach. And while he was sure the Covenant could find useful things therein, he had no doubts ONI in their institutional paranoia would have all manner of fail-safe systems in place to make any attempt to seize it short lived and highly explosive. Literally.

Shaking off the questions that gnawed at him like a bad itch inside his armour, Fred turned his attention back to the Corvette, focusing the display past the encampment and on it. A pair of Purple gravity beams linked the core of the ships primary hull to the ground and the large ring shaped 'wing' that supported the bulk of the Corvette off the ground had any number of open hatches, through which any number of cargo crates were being visibly offloaded-

"We're getting pinged" Kelly broke into his thoughts, mere seconds after they had lumbered to a stop. A box appeared on the screen with a red tag linking it to the Corvette, Covenant Glyphs pouring into it with a chiming sound. Kelly had disabled the communications link that had let the Elite in the Wraith Tank earlier blow their cover, meaning the Covenant were now limited to sending 'text messages'; a console in front of Kelly coming up with several possible responses. Without a direct translation though, he didn't really have any way of trying to respond to bluff his way through a conversation ...

So he didn't even try. He'd reply a different way.

"Target the Corvette" he ordered Grace, studying its profile carefully. RED FLAG had mandated study of Covenant ship design for the mission of breaching and taking over one, meaning he had a decent idea of where to shoot them to hurt them.

In theory.

"Dorsal hull, forward of the starboard flaring, the gap in the armour there-

"-should give us a clean shot from this angle into the engineering compartment " Grace finished the thought, shifting the crosshairs on the ship to the target in question. "The first shot should take out their primary starboard conduit, but it'll take at _least_ two shots to kill the Reactor".

"Well this could be interesting" Li muttered as he traced the secondary plasma cannon targeting box almost casually towards the Covenant troops at the ECP, some of whom were gesturing oddly at them, probably irritated with the lack of any communications.

>Somewhat vindictively, Li settled the crosshairs on them first.<p>

"Very well" Fred agreed with a nod, before grinning slightly and giving the other he had wanted to give since being kicked out of the _Pillar of Autumn_. The time for recon work was over, as was the time for defence. Now it was time for the Spartans to do what they were born to do.

>"Spartans; destroy everything".

The primary plasma cannon snapped open at once, green light dancing around the muzzle as the Scarabs reactor output was redlined and diverted to the front of the assault platform. The Grunts in front of them along the entrance to the encampment tossed their weapons away and ran wildly and, for once, the Elites were not far behind -and in several cases rapidly overtaking- them, as the magnetic field formed and a torrent of plasma poured out in a shallow arc over the encampment, tearing into the side of the unshielded ship.

>The energy blast was sustained over several agonizingly long seconds as the Corvette appeared to simply soak up the incredible firepower...<p>

...Then, just as the plasma beam started to sputter out leaving nothing but a relatively tiny hole glowing on the side of the ship, the gravity beams died. A number of Elites moving up to or down from the ship suddenly found Reach's gravity back in control of their destiny and went crashing to the ground, the few lucky ones only falling a matter of meters inevitably crushed by others falling from much higher up in a rather messy pile. A secondary explosion ripped out through the breach in the hull as several plasma conduits were torn open in the attack, fires breaking out across dozens of decks for hundreds of meters, complete chaos breaking out on the ships bridge as its Shipmaster screamed at the skeleton crew to start shooting at the Scarab, get him engine power and raise the shields - all at the same time.

Simultaneously as the plasma beam cut off, Li swung the secondary cannon around and opened fire, rapid pulses of red energy blasting into the fleeing Elites and Grunts, vaporizing any they hit outright and throwing others around like dolls as the ground superheated and exploded under the hellish touch of the pulses of energy. The two Shades at this point of the camp returned fire, tracing their triple plasma cannons across the front of the Scarab in a desperate attempt to knock out its main weapon, a plan rendered useless as Grace snapped the covers shut and eliminated for good as Li swung the secondary cannon back down and detonated each of the weapons emplacements with a quick burst of fire before swinging the weapon up and exploding the Sniper Tower beyond them, the Jackals survival instincts proving somewhat more finely as the occupant leapt clear well ahead of the incoming firepower.

Fred started to move the Scarab forward, mentally urging the main gun to recharge faster as he walked through the main entrance with the kind of contemptuous indifference only a massive walking death machine could have. Li wheeled the plasma cannon around to the left and exploded a pair of Ghosts moving in to attack - although exactly what they could have done was open to question - before shifting fire back the other way, tracing fire around the perimeter into two, three, four more of the Sniper Towers and their attached plasma cannons, more to cause chaos and confusion than to score kills, before he brought the gun back around towards the Corvette itself. The Spartan paused for a half second to consider the Target Rich environment before holding the trigger down and spraying pulses of energy into a number of the barracks used by the Grunts, breaching the methane filled interiors and mixing them with the oxygen outside, letting the superheated plasma ignite the mixture-

The firestorm that exploded was gratifyingly impressive, a wave of flame exploding out and through the rows of tents as the bulk of the methane was liberated and consumed, the flames only growing as they roasted alive any number of Elites that had barely started to react to the chaos and any number of Grunts curled up in balls trying their best to ignore it and continue sleeping, secondary explosions tearing through other tents as volatile substances stored in the cargo pallets and tents cooked off, and for a millisecond, Fred dared to think that this would be a cakewalk.

He regretted his presumption for daring that force known as Murphy,

as several milliseconds later Kellys board started to chime, loudly.

"Corvettes Lateral plasma cannons are coming online" Kelly warned, their run of good luck coming to a screaming end in the sound of the warning klaxons. "We're being targeted!"

"Everyone hang on" Fred yelled as he braced himself.

The trio of guns on the side of the Corvette swivelled as on its bridge, an Elite finally managed to stagger to the gunnery console, releasing the safety locks and returning fire at their tormenter, a salvo of blue plasma bolts arcing out to smash into the walker stomping towards them.

It was both the first and last salvo they would fire in this engagement, the capacitors built into the weapons drained dry by this one salvo and the link to the main reactor severed by the Scarabs opening shot ... but it might have just been enough. While the Corvette may have been a relatively small warship compared to a Covenant Capital Ship, it was none the less a Covenant warship, and its guns weren't something a ground unit - even one as powerful as a Scarab - could ever afford to take lightly. The first bolt smashed into the front of the Walker, melting and ablating the armour covering the main gun, but not quite penetrating the heavy plating. The follow up bolts probably would have, but the hastily aimed salvo didn't have quite that tight a grouping, instead tearing the less protected secondary plasma cannon off its mount above the main cannon, as a third tore through the majority of the - mostly cosmetic - roof over the top deck, passing through the thin metal to explode in the middle of a group of grunts much further downrange who had just started to dare think they might live through the sudden chaos, vaporizing them at once.

"Secondary cannon is gone" Li yelled as the lights inside the Scarab flickered wildly for a few seconds as automatic systems rerouted the power flows, the walker staggering as a half dozen alarms started chiming, whole swaths of controls going black.

"Primary took a hit, but it's still reading as online, I think, recharge in nine seconds" Grace reported, as cool as deep space as she always was as she swivelled the main cannon back on target. "Isolating the damaged hull area..."

"Take the shot, don't wait for my order" Fred replied tersely as he fought to keep the walker stable, the surging power flow to the leg actuators and gravity beams causing the walker to stagger slightly before shaking it off and starting to walk straight again, desperately trying to keep steady for Grace to take her shot.

Grace hit the button to open the blast covering around the main gun, the cannon exposing itself with a protesting scream of metal from several of the warped members, one of the covers snapping off at the hinge and falling away in protest as green fireflies again danced, unnoticed to everyone and the Scarabs systems itself, the fact that one of the covers had not opened, but stayed fuzzed shut...

The beam of energy once again lanced out, but was drained somewhat as it was forced to waste part of its energy to blow through its own armour plate, the backwash frying the emitters in moments and causing

the entire canon assembly to shut down as it was quite literally cooked by its own fire. The second shot was the last the weapon would ever fire...
>But it had been enough.<p>

The energy poured into the raging inferno and punched through the internal bulkheads of the Covenant ship into the ships engine room. Engineers had frantically been trying to shut down the fusion reaction as they moved to protect and repair the ships power plant, but with the Elites on the bridge countering their every effort as they furiously tried to get their ships weapons back online, it was still a roaring tempest of dense, superheated plasma compressed in a magnetic bottle, inside a containment chamber made of some of the strongest materials known to Covenant science. Against such a wall, even the Scarab gun couldn't penetrate with one shot ... but denied an easy breach, the burning stream of blue/white energy hungrily spread out around the spheres surface, vaporizing and burning anything along the way before the blast of energy finally dissipated...including a good chunk of the magnetic field generators spaced at precise intervals around the reactor that shaped and contained the plasma.

Within nanoseconds, the magnetic field became asymmetrical.

Within a millisecond, the plasma had crashed in full force against the weakened reactor chamber walls where the Scarab gun had done its work.

Within a microsecond, the plasma had melted its way through, and the equivalent of two full Covenant Plasma Torpedoes erupted inside the ship.

A wave of blue fire swept through the Corvette, down corridors and conduits vaporizing anyone in the way before they could even perceive what was going on. As the ship was not properly at battle stations, countless blast doors and hatches that may have contained the detonation were wide open to better allow cargo to be offloaded, and so the plasma rampaged through the main body of the ship. On the bridge, the command crew had just enough time to hear the scream of an alarm before the far bulkhead disintegrated, their personal shields not providing anything like sufficient protection from the inferno that washed over them. The tall spire rising above the ship sparked with huge bolts of energy several times, sending a ripple of white hexagonal patterns across the sky in time with each discharge before it snapped clean off where it joined the ship, falling with a scream of metal to smash into a Sniper Tower that thus far had been spared any attention; crushing both it and the unfortunate Jackal inside flat.

Back in the Scarabs control room, things were not much better as sparks flew, systems overloaded and every alarm built into every piece of equipment went off simultaneously. The reactor spiked and fluctuated from feedback from the main lines being burned by its own weapon, and Fred felt the war machine shudder to a halt square in the middle of the Covenant encampment as the reactor shut down, the Spartans frantic attempts to find an override failing as the safety systems kicked in and locked the walkers legs up, freezing it in place.

"Well that isn't good" Kelly quipped mildly as the Spartans stood,

the Scarab around them making grinding and snapping sounds that really didn't sound terribly healthy. "What now Boss?"

"Everyone up top" Fred ordered, the distant sound of Covenant small arms fire increasing as the remaining enemy troops rallied at the sudden shut down of the Scarab and pressed in to attack, their utter terror turning to rage as they sought to kill anything on board. "Prepare to repel boarders".

Alpha Team hurried back up the ramp, the shield into the control room dead. The roof had been mostly torn away, but bits and pieces had been fused and scattered around the cratered upper deck, ironically providing decent cover for the Spartans as they crawled out into a standard 360 degree deployment, the hissing of plasma fire and chinking of needle rounds ricocheting off the armour plating growing as they took up position and Fred looked around.

>From up top, the damage to the Covenant encampment looked even worse than he had expected. The Corvette and the bivouac the Covenant had set up around it were both cheerfully burning with countless other fires along the perimeter raging out of control, a light wind unfortunately blowing the thick smoke off towards the Big Horn River rather than back towards them, robbing them of possible cover they could have used for exfiltration. Worse, with nothing left to loose, it looked like every surviving Covenant soldier in the camp was drawing back on the disabled Scarab and pelting it with small arms fire. Their weapons really didn't do anything, but it was keeping the Spartans bottled up, trying to dismount or fast rope down would be suicide given the number of contacts that were settling in around them, and it wouldn't take long for the Elites to start lobbing plasma grenades up, or perhaps blow some of the Scarabs legs sufficiently to topple it over...<p>

Shots barked out as the Spartans opened fire, a precise volley taking down a dozen enemy snipers in a couple of seconds and causing the local troops to flinch for a moment, but the return fire only increased as the moment passed, forcing the Spartans to stay down and trade fire with more distant enemies. Fred was about to ask for any suggestions, his tactical options reducing rapidly to trying to stall those forming under them with their few grenades, when a familiar whistling, screaming sound hissed through the air.

"INCOMING!" Kelly shouted, faster on the ball as always, and the Spartans moved in a blur deeper into whatever cover was available, boosting their shields to full and minimizing their target profile, just as the first shells impacted.

A rapid series of explosions rocked the Scarab on its feet as blast after blast detonated in close proximity, Fred counting a pattern of six, followed by another pattern of six, than a third before the thunder slowly faded out to be replaced by an incredibly odd silence.

Well except the crackling sound of the cheerfully burning Corvette.

"What was that?" Grace demanded over TEAMCOM, although if it was because she was confused, or just pouting because massive explosions had just gone off that she had nothing to do with, Fred couldn't guess.

But it wasn't him who answered.

"That my dear Spartan, was the sound of eighteen fragmentation and high explosive mortar shells impacting in a time on target grid pattern around your disabled Scarab on the Covenant troop concentrations" Wesley replied without warning, more than a hint of a smirk in his voice as he broke into their tactical channel "Bad form I daresay to not ask you first, but when the Active Camouflage Field went down and I finally got a look at that encampment, spying that your transport was both disabled and surrounded by Covenant forces massing to attack, I just could not help myself. My drones show no more than two dozen left alive and moving on thermal scan across the area, I'm uploading their tracks into your systems now".

"Acknowledged" Fred replied, giving a quick series of hand signals that got the Spartans moving, the group standing and all but daring any troops left alive to take shots at them. And when none immediately came - hardly surprising given the incredible vista of destruction around the Scarab that Fred swore had not been there fifteen seconds ago - they fished out the blue glowing Covenant ropes from their storage compartment and moved to dismount. Malcolm and Vincent remained behind, the former un-slinging his so far unused sniper rifle and the later preparing to spot for him from their perch as Fred lightly jumped off the side of the walker, controlling his fall with the glowing blue rope to land in the incredible mess of bodies of Elites around the legs of the walker that the mortar fragments had scathed through. Already, his Spartans were going about their cleanup tasks and putting bullets through the heads of any that still showed any signs of life, as a counterpoint CRACK - pause - CRACK - pause came from the Scarabs upper deck, as their sniper went to work on more distant targets. "Can you give me a SITREP?"

"All Spartans accounted for" Wesley replied, "although we have a total of four wounded from the rest of your teams. Nothing serious I understand, but they'll probably be out of action for at least a few weeks with injuries they took. North and South LZs were completely destroyed, nothing anything like as elaborate as this zone though my boy, I have to admit I am impressed with the level of construction the Covenant achieved in such a short space of time here, what with the-

"This whole area was set up days ago" Fred corrected the AI as the Spartans fanned out in two pairs to start their sweep, Fred holding under the battered walker as he conversed with the AI. "Something else was going on here, I think the attack on the orbital generators was opportunistic. These troops could have destroyed the Generator complex days ago if they wanted to, when it had nothing in the way of defences. Frankly, I think they were here for something else".

"For the record" the AI replied after a few seconds of silence, "it appears that Major Dare agrees with you, she wants to know if you have any theories as to what might be going on?"

"I don't know " Fred admitted to his annoyance, not exactly happy at being unable to give a real voice to his feelings, but pleased that the Major felt the same way. "Whatever it is they were after, it was a higher priority than blasting the reactors, otherwise that Corvette could have just risen to five thousand feet and glassed the whole defensive setup" he pointed out, pausing as as his motion sensor

_pinged _at a contact closing, Fred stepping into cover and raising his rifle in the general direction indicated...

"The Covenant have been concentrating on the Viery Territory to the exclusion of most of the rest of Reach, except for probable incidental or critical strategic targets" the AI pointed out as Fred shouldered his rifle, aiming at an unclear shadow through the smoke that moved towards him, relaxing slightly as he saw it was the bulbous forms of a group of Covenant engineers wandering aimlessly. The group's leader chirped at him, before squealing slightly as it saw the massive form of the crippled Scarab, an excited series of chirps and whistles passing between it and the group as they hurriedly floated on over, their tentacles eagerly reaching up to start 'feeling' the hull of the walker, studying the damage to it as Fred shook his head slightly, still slightly unnerved by the creatures almost childlike ignorance of the war going on around them, just so long as they could 'fix' things. "I don't suppose you left the Corvettes computer core sufficiently intact to recover any data from it that might shed a clue?"

Fred glanced up at the burning Corvette, which with prompt and impeccable timing collapsed, the primary hull falling to the ground as the supports that attached it to the wide ring it had landed on finally failed, the noise impressive even from this distance.

"I would say ... no" Fred finally replied with considerable aplomb as he kept an eye on the Engineers, deciding to let them work and idly wondering what the UNSC would do with the Scarab if they _did_ manage to repair it.

"Pity" the AI replied with an almost audible shrug over the COM. "At any rate, as soon as you finish mopping up, that should be it for the Covenant forces in the area. We've released all the operational Spartans to rejoin you and help you finish your sweep, upstairs looks like a stalemate, it doesn't appear that anything particularly interesting is going to happen anytime soon".

A massive explosion just above the horizon that turned the night sky into day for one glorious second gave a lie to that statement.

4. Chapter 4

****Chapter 2. **Reach - Part 3**

****0632 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>USS Odyssey, Anchor-1 Shipyards, Epsilon Eridani
System**

Covenant Frigates were formidable enough combatants, at least when deployed against their UNSC counterparts. They had shields sufficient to eliminate any threat from the Archer Missiles or the mid calibre autocannon human Frigates used as secondary weapons. Even the modern MAC guns on UNSC Frigates were hardly guaranteed to score kills against them as, unlike the larger Covenant Cruisers and Carriers, the Frigate was actually nimble enough to make trying to peg it at long range with the unguided slugs difficult ... while the guided plasma torpedo battery in its bow had no such constraints.

They were generally the first command given to a newly promoted

Shipmaster - the lighter Corvettes in the Covenant fleet overwhelmingly attached to Special Operations Command and actually considered a much more prestigious assignment. The expected lack of experience generally meant that Frigates were always deployed in semi-permanent 'pairings', much like Hunters. More often than not close family members or warriors who could be counted to support each other - and political interference in determining these pairings to cement powerful alliances between Sangheili families was hardly unprecedented. Which meant that there was often a dangerous combination of aggressive and risk taking shipmasters hoping to achieve notice and glory, who lacked the experience and seasoning to react well to unexpected situations.

And so it was not entirely surprising that as the _Odyssey_ curved around towards them, the Shipmasters of the two Frigates guarding their triad of the human space station simply ... froze.
>Instinct fought against training, the need to meet the enemy head on with open arms warring with the much more conservative lessons from their honoured Fleetmaster that taught the value of caution and restraint. The orders to hold and buy the boarding parties time to acquire the map to every nest these vermin had made among the stars was foremost in their mind ... but so too was the fate of the Triad of ships on the other side of the station who had been obliterated as swiftly as a Jiralhanae Chieftain would bat aside an irritating Unggoy labourer.<p>

And so it was unsurprising that the two Frigates simply ... froze. Rather than engaging their slipspace engines and retreating from the battlefield in good order, rather than pushing forward aggressively and trying to take out the human ship in a Kamikaze run or even contacting their senior commander on board the Destroyer holding position further back behind them, the two Frigates simply hung in front of the station and blazed away uselessly with everything they had, strobes of laser fire lashing at the incoming ship as a volley of Plasma torpedoes were flung downrange, trying to buy every unit of time they could.

Odyssey tore both ships apart with twin plasma beams almost in passing, as if the vastly more massive warships were little more than irritants to be eliminated when convenient as opposed to warships capable of obliterating every major city across a planet in a matter of days. Small blue flickers of plasma fire reached out and splashed across the shield grid of the Battle Cruiser as she blew through the expanding explosion of the two warships, a number of _Banshee_ class light attack fighters pouring their light plasma fire at her as she loomed past the silent ring of Gamma Station. Appearing to show yet more contempt for their opponents, the railgun mounts didn't even bother to return their fire, leaving the fighters to the flash mob of Longswords that the _Odyssey_ now had gleefully following in her wake.

>In truth, it was more that the railgun operators were holding fire because Gamma Station was backstopping the Covenant fighters and Landry was disinclined to shoot up the station he was trying to protect, but none the less as he brought his command around the station on an intercept course for the final Covenant warship in the area, it did a splendid job of spiking the intimidation factor.<p>

Perhaps _too_ much.

Granted precious seconds to come up with a plan thanks to the sacrifices of their Bothers, the Shipmaster ordered his command moved onto an intercept course and gave a solemn nod to his Second, warning sirens screaming across the bridge as a holographic control was gently stroked.

"Energy surge!" Carter called, alarms suddenly breaking into the otherwise professional air on the bridge, their volume increasing with the energy readings. "Its building inside the ship, increasing exponentially-"

"Evasive-" Landry started to order, but Marks was a step ahead, pulling hard up and away from the enemy as a shimmering effect seemed to start building around the Covenant ship; darkened conduits along parts of its hull lighting up in a spider web pattern as the full power of an overloading reactor was channelled into the slipspace core in a matter of seconds until it could take no more->A perfectly spherical blue ball of energy exploded out from the back of the Covenant ship, consuming the ship itself in a heartbeat as it expanded to a radius of five kilometres. It barely avoiding consuming Gamma Station as the *Odyssey* skimmed the edge of the field for a moment before pulling away in a blur of motion as the chaotic eleven dimensional space-time reality of slipspace was extruded into normal space for a heartbeat. The Covenant Destroyer, a number of Banshees and most of a Class-E Drydock were consumed, their mass and energy scattered on the atomic level randomly across ten square light years before the sphere collapsed in on itself, a secondary energy pulse swept out from the collapsing bubble and over the *Odysseys* shields before passing through several dozen space stations, frying unhardened systems and turning a chunk of the Anchor-1 Shipyards into little more than many megatons of girders and framework flying in formation.

"What in the hell was *that*?" Marks demanded as the ship stabilized, the Major correcting for the impact of the wave as it dissipated back into slipspace as suddenly as it had appeared, bringing the ship around and away from the shipyards towards Nav Point Delta. After a moment of shock, the Longsword squadrons who had been far enough behind to not be caught in the rupture regrouped, realizing that the final Covenant warship had been eliminated and turning on what few Covenant strike craft were in the area with a vengeance. The UNSC *Savannah*, a *Paris* class Frigate that had been hiding in the shadow of a nearby shipyard throughout the engagement also came to life as the *Odyssey* moved off, powering up her jamming gear and placing an electronic wall between the station and Covenant fleet to make damn sure that even if the Covenant boarding parties still rampaging through the station got their hands on the NAV data, they would had no way to get it back to their fleet.

"Computer says it was some kind of shockwave made up of exotic energy - highly charged" Carter replied, studying her boards as she tried to make sense of the data. And when the data was telling her that the laws of physics as she understood them from a decade in the Stargate program had just been thrown out the window, that was tougher than it looked.

"What caused it?" Landry demanded.

"If I had to guess, some kind of overload or uncontrolled activation of its FTL systems - slipspace drive James called it. But it didn't

look anything like the jumps we saw earlier...and I'm not detecting any corresponding emergence of the ship elsewhere in the system" the Colonel shrugged, giving up for now on making heads or tails of the data for the immediate timeframe, beyond the fact that space appeared to have been torn open, twisted into something resembling a pretzel that didn't have any concerns for linear time, and then snapped closed again. "Definitely not subspace based. However this 'slipspace drive' works it's on a completely different principal to Hyperdrive technology".

"Dare I ask, what would have happened if we had hit that bubble of energy?" the General inquired.

"I can't say for sure but I'm guessing nothing good" Carter replied with a slight shrug. "Given that most of a space station caught in the bubble has vanished and that I'm not detecting any matter at all in the area the bubble had been..."

"Marks, standing orders. Keep us at least fifteen kilometres away from any Covenant ship from this point on" the General ordered, having had enough of falling into unstable rips in the space-time continuum for a lifetime thank you very much, watching instead as they approached their F-302s waiting in a higher orbit for them, listening with half an ear to Cooper as she oversaw the recovery operation. In theory, fast recoveries like this were done by linking autopilots on the fighter and the Odyssey and letting computers do the work, but Landry very much doubted even one of the craft were under computer control, the contempt pilots had for such systems still alive and good in the USAF, if not more so with the rise of the modern day UCAV. "Carter, what's the status of the Covenant fleet?"

"They've just gotten underway" Carter observed as she switched back to the long range sensor readouts, the distinct tsunami of red icons sweeping out from behind Reach's moon, the surviving UNSC Warships forming up to meet them looking ridiculously outnumbered and outgunned both. "Looks like two main groups, eighty percent of the ships have broken orbit in-formation with their flagship vessel, the rest look like they're shifting their orbit to the day side of the moon, but aren't following. I can't tell for certain ... but judging from these readings, I'd say a lot of them look pretty beaten up".

"Damaged ships being held in reserve" Landry dismissed them from his calculations for now as he brought up the readouts of the main body of both fleets on his own tablet display. James had spent some time with Carter and Marks both identifying the various ship classes of both sides and providing a surprising amount of general tactical data on them for a ground pounder, and as he traced his eyes down the lists he couldn't help but wince as he saw how the two compared to each other.

There were barely fifty ships remaining in the UNSC fleet, many of them damaged and mostly made up of lighter Destroyers and Frigates. Against that, four hundred Covenant warships were advancing, formed up around their gigantic Supercarrier which, at two and a half times the length of a Wraith Hiveship, had just broken the record books for largest space going construct ever seen by the SGC and had power readings to suggest it had at least a passing shot at taking on the entire UNSC fleet by itself. Their slow, straight in approach gave up

some advantages in terms of trying to envelop or split the UNSC defence to be sure and it would be hard for any shot the UNSC fired to not find a target ... but it also let the enemy overlap their laser batteries in a way that would make long range missile fire useless and a fighter strikes suicidal. And unless the UNSC made their shots count, any damaged ships could easily be retired back into the formation and protected behind the shields of the others, like a space born Roman Testudo.

It was an overwhelming, implacable advance. A mailed fist being drawn back to smash through whatever stood in its way with unstoppable and utterly overwhelming force - and Landry knew that their relatively slow speed of advance towards Reach had to be as much as for reasons of trying to intimidate their opponents as for maintaining unit cohesion.

It was also the worst possible formation for them to have taken, with the _Odyssey_ on the field.

"Alright, it looks like they're not getting the message yet" Landry exhaled as he switched his tablet to a top-down system view of the extended orbital space of Reach, dropping a navigation marker to Marks as the last of the F-302s were secured back on board. "Marks, move us here".

"Yes Sir" the Major nodded, swinging the _Odyssey_ down and around until her bow was pointing at the distant moon. He engaged the hyperdrive and everyone on board couldn't help but hold their breath as _Odyssey_ dove into the purple rift of a Hyperspace window-

-and re-emerged a few hundred thousand kilometres away with Reach gone from under them and the moon much larger in front of them, at a point directly between the UNSC and Covenant. A buzzing sound echoed across the bridge as a rash of red icons were painted across the HUD on the forward window, icons by the _hundreds_, most of them clustered in a narrow arc dead just offset from the cratered brown ball of Reach's second moon. The ships were still too distant to be seen as anything but bright points of light...but the reality of no doubt suddenly having the undivided attention of a fleet larger than anything Earth had ever seen in ten years of the Stargate program was no less intimidating for that.

"We're in position, jump was normal" Marks confirmed a moment later, a great many people letting out the breath they didn't realize they had been holding when they came out of hyperspace where they planned and not in any other universe. The diversion to recover the F-302s somewhat costly in time, but Landry hadn't wanted to risk leaving _anyone_ _behind_ if something went wrong again with the damn hyperdrive. Again.

"High frequency Radar and Microwave sweeps from the Covenant fleet, almost every ship that has a line of sight on us is targeting us" Carter reported as their systems came back online, muting the threat receiver as her earpieces speaker squealed in overload from the hundreds of simultaneous warnings going off all at once. "I'm also getting X-Band sweeps from the orbital defence cannons backstopping the UNSC fleet, they're reorienting this way".

"Are they locking _us_ up?" Landry asked quickly, trying to ignore the sudden itchy feeling between his shoulder blades, as if he knew

there was a snipers laser scope suddenly tracing over his back while he was busy concentrating on the hoard of enemies in front. Carter had expressed to him during the planning for this whole operation that while the standard weapons of UNSC ships were not really any threat to them with shields in place, the C-Fractional 'Super' MAC stations in orbit were another matter entirely. Despite all the incredible upgrades _Odyssey_ had received from the Asgard, their inertial dampening systems had not been touched due to time constraints and the more basic systems Earth had installed had _never_ been designed to deal with a c-fractional collision of a five thousand ton projectile to the shield grid they were tied into. It was the Colonels 'considered opinion' that it was an even money bet if the system could cope with the massive momentum of the impact. And if the dampeners failed and the momentum was transferred through the grid into the shield generator...

Well, if they were lucky, the generator would just fry beyond repair.

>If they were unlucky, the Generator would fry beyond repair and the massive energy held in the shield grid would be released _inside _the ship.

Even money were not odds with which Landry wanted to gamble when he was the house, and if there was even the _slightest_ sign that the UNSC were locking them up...

"No" Carter answered his question, to his hidden relief. "I'd say its fire control systems ranging on the Covenant fleet beyond us, nothing appears to be pointed at us - at least not yet.

"Let's hope it stays that way" Landry replied succinctly. "How long until the Covenant fleet enters their effective range?"

"At this speed?" Carter checked her board. "Based on the distance the Super Cruiser was holding at from the orbital defence grid and sniping UNSC ships, probably three minutes? Three and a half tops?"

Landry nodded and hit the communications link on his armrest.

"Jackson, you've got three minutes, make it count" he said, glancing at the wall mounted tactical display as he closed the link. "Time Mark".

"Time marked" Cooper acknowledged behind him, and a digital timer started running on the ships main display.

"Colonel, do you have a track on the _Pillar of Autumn_?"

"Yes Sir. I still can't decode their transponders, but they are the only _Halcyon _class Cruiser in the UNSC fleet and James positively IDd her earlier".

"Then send the package" he ordered her, the clock -literally- ticking away as he watched it, Carter directing the ships communications systems and broadcasting a tight beam burst to the distant UNSC ship in the core of their fleets Battleline.

"Done"

"Alright" he nodded. "Now we wait. And pray someone on that fleet has a damn brain".

****0638 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>UNSC _**Pillar of Autumn**_**, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System**

"...I wish I knew Admiral" Keyes concluded to his superior visible on the row of screens at the back of the Captains command area on his bridge. "Whoever they are, Cortana has gone over the data with a fine toothcomb from every way she can think of and she's convinced they are human, just not UNSC".

"That doesn't leave many possibilities Jacob" Vice Admiral Whitcomb responded in a deep voice, his eyes narrowing as he considered the data as both he and the Captain had reviewed about this incredible ship apparently named 'Odyssey' that had just crashed their engagement and ignored any attempts at communication as it ran around blowing up Covenant warships. Keyes had forwarded Cortanas conclusions to the Trafalgar as he had brought the Autumn back into the main battle line beside the few other surviving Cruisers in the fleet and Whitcomb had personally called him up to discuss the matter. He suspected the personal call was as much because Cortana had taken the liberty to -and been able to- hack into a highly classified ONI database to eliminate any Naval Intelligence skulduggery as a possible source for this ship, the Admirals current low opinion of ONI entirely well known across Second Fleet. "I might, might be able to credit a cast off insurrectionist cell ripping some Covenant tech off and slapping it on one of the few ships they might have left ... but building an entirely new ship like that? With technology beyond the Covenant or us?"

"I don't know what to say sir" Keyes said carefully, more than aware of the Admirals legendary temper and not wanting to be the one he took his frustration out on. "The only other possibilities would appear to be a human group we don't know about that's been out there and has chosen now to make its entrance, or, a black Operation beyond the clearance of anyone on Reach to know about, which I would find unlikely after the shakedown ONI went through".

The Admiral grunted at that. Another reason that the other might have called the Autumn is that Keyes was one of the few officers under his command to be fully aware of the recent 'housecleaning' at ONI, entirely thanks to his association with both Doctor Catherine Halsey and his current assignment to RED FLAG - and it was clear that Whitcomb was not as convinced as he that ONI had been cleared of all its secrets. But was forestalled from saying anything as a set of footsteps approached Keyes, the Captain glancing to the side and noting the approach of an Officer escorted by a pair of marines, the trio snapping to attention just next to Cortanas currently inactive holotank. Dismissing the leathernecks with a nod, Keyes gestured the newcomer to join him in front of the screen, the other obediently moving over into field of view of the cameras relaying the picture to the flagship a dozen kilometres to starboard. He was nondescript to a T; a mid-sized man with short cropped hair that could have passed for any one of the mid-rate officers on board without trying...

... except for the insignia on the man's shoulders of black and

silver eagle wings that transfixed three bright stars, superimposed over a highly distinct pyramid.

"Ah, Lieutenant Haverson" Keyes greeted the other for the Admirals benefit, whose gaze switched like a targeting laser to the man assigned by ONI Section-III to the RED FLAG operation as the field liaison officer. "I take it Cortana has briefed you on everything going on outside?"

"She has Sir, Sir" he added as he spotted the Admiral on the screen - and to his credit, didn't flinch under the level three glare on the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations face. "And I'm afraid I don't have any more of an idea than she did about what is going on. Nothing about this ship; its design, technology or even its name comes close to any ONI Black projects I was ever aware of".

"And just how many of them _were_ you aware of Lieutenant?" Witcomb asked in a deceptively polite voice that set off alarm bells in Keyes head.

"Very few, at least until last month" the other responded after a second to think, clearly choosing his words with some care. Current rumour had it that Witcomb liked nothing better for breakfast than freshly diced Section III staff lightly salted with Section Zero after being fully brought into the loop on ONI's shenanigans over the last decade or two - and clearly the Lieutenant didn't fancy being today's meal. "But during the ... 'reassignments' across ONI last month, I was assigned from Section I to III as an aide to Admiral Stanforth when he was promoted to Section III Head and acting Commander of ONI, as part of his staff. I can assure you nothing even _close_ to this came up in the R&D compartments; I mean, the difficulties R&D had in getting the shields on the _Saber_ -"

"Yes yes, it's all absolutely impossible that they are doing what they are doing. Good thing no-one told _them_ _that_, or the Covenant".

Both Keyes and Haverson were thankfully relieved of the responsibility of having to think up some way to answer _that_ _rather_ pointed statement when Lieutenant Hall, whom Keyes had given orders to watch this 'Odyssey' like a hawk, suddenly called out from her station on the side of the bridge.

"Sirs, aspect change on primary target they've just vanished from my scopes ... wait ... correction, they just vanished and then _reappeared_ _in_ between us and the Covenant fleet, distant one hundred thousand clicks on a heading of two four four"

"From orbit? Any sign of a slipspace rupture?" the ONI officer asked before anyone could get a word in, his eyes narrowing in sudden thought.

"No, neither from where they were or when they emerged" the other shook his head firmly from the side of the bridge. "Not even a whisper".

The three officers shared a confused look at that.

"Then how did it get from _there_ to _here_?" Keyes wondered aloud.

"Could we be dealing with multiple targets?" Haverson speculated? "Disengaging and engaging active camouflage? Decoys perhaps, to make it _look _like it is there now, while it moves there under its own power?"

"Cortana?" Keyes posed the question with a sideways glance, and her hologram materialized, already shaking her head, the Admiral glancing to the side of his screen where no doubt he was in turn seeing her avatar on his own bridge.

"Unless it's a decoy with precisely the same size and precisely the same hard returns and EM readings, then no, it's the same ship alright. But, I did detect hard burst of X-Ray and Radio waves just before it vanished from orbit and just before it appeared again. I've never seen anything like them before ... but given that it moved from point A to B without moving through normal space ..." she shook her head. "Either one of these contacts _is _a decoy so perfect we can't tell, or, we just saw some kind of point to point teleportation or FTL technology completely unlike anything either we or the Covenant have".

Keyes exchanged another glance with the officers at that possibility, his confusion only multiplying. He opened his mouth to speculate on previously outlandish, impossible sounding ideas, but-

"Sirs, I'm picking up a tight beam signal on the E-Band from the Odyssey!" Lieutenant Dominique barked out suddenly, snapping the faces of Keyes and Haverson around towards her. "It's being beamed directly at us on a tight beam channel!"

"At _us_? Confirm that!"

"Confirmed Sir" the other replied quickly and Keyes turned back to look at Whitcomb, whose expression Keyes thought was just as baffled and surprised as his must have been ... before both of them almost simultaneously to look at the ONI officer next to him, who seemed to finally flinch, almost visibly shrinking under their attention as the none too subtle point was made without saying a word that the only thing that made the Autumn different from the rest of the fleet was that _technically _it was still assigned to RED FLAG, an ONI special mission with Section III Personnel on board...

>But Keyes had always thought he was a good judge of character. And while trying to make sense of an ONI officer was probably an exercise in futility, Keyes couldn't help but feel in his gut that the other was flinching because he had no idea what was going on here, but was finding himself suddenly at the focus of all the events none the less.<p>

"Dominique, route the signal here and link it to the _Trafalgar_" Keyes ordered before the Admiral could demand answers Keyes was suddenly sure that Haverson couldn't give. Hard as it often was for someone who had seen the dark sides of ONI during his long association with Doctor Halsey to believe there _could _be 'innocents' in ONI he was willing to give the man the benefit of the doubt. "Let's see what-"

"Begging your pardon Sirs, but it's not an open frequency, it appears to be a highly encrypted digital data burst. _Very _heavily encrypted, I've never seen this particular scheme before. It'll take

me a while to figure this out..."

"Cortana?" the Admiral handed the problem off swiftly.

"Analysing" the AI confirmed, her gaze becoming distant for a second.

Then two.

Then four.

Keyes glanced at Haverson, who had regained his composure and raised an eyebrow in return. Say what you would about the highly spirited AI but she was never slow. Artificial Intelligences interfaced with humans at human speeds so it was easy to forget they could -and did think at speeds vastly beyond human norms. And if she was saying nothing for four seconds ... then either she was ignoring them, or something had just stunned her on such a level that she was devoting all her processing power, even that she normally dedicated to talking to humans, on studying and analysing whatever she had found.

"Cortana?" Keyes prodded as the silence dragged uncomfortably on.

It took another second, but Cortana suddenly 'un-froze', lines of code squirting around her body faster than he could follow, before she turned back to face the three humans, a bright blue shimmering passing across her.

"Sorry, that was ... a lot to take in" she said, shaking her head slightly as she got herself back under control making Keyes more than a little worried; anything that could startle Cortana like that ... especially as they were only five minutes from possibly going into combat with the enemy again ...

>"The short version" the AI continued, "is this. That was a Spartan Mission Recorder encrypted under a RED FLAG scheme. Specifically Spartan James-005. It contained a complete mission log recording, as well as several log entries made by him while he was on board the Odyssey ... which he has been on for the last fourteen hours".<p>

Keyes expression shifted to one of utter confusion.

"Cortana" he tried, "James and the rest of Blue Team were on board the Autumn until-"

"-less than an hour ago, I know" she said, holding up a hand to forestall any response. "Let me explain. This is going to sound crazy, but it's the truth, so I'll give it to you straight. The Odyssey is indeed a human ship. An Earth ship. But it's not from our universe" Cortana started, earning blinks and somewhat incredulous looks from the group, but no-one interrupted her as she spoke, Captains board next to her and the displays on the Trafalgar updating with pictures of various people with name labels, what Keyes thought had to be internal images from the ship, all of them overlaid with the icons of a UNSC mission recording under Spartan 005's tag.

"According to this data which appears authentic, an accident in their FTL system brought them into our reality. They destroyed that

Covenant cruiser entirely out of self defence before they moved off to try and determine where they were and what had happened and they saved James-005 after finding him flying through space on a malfunctioning thruster pack. At that point, they somehow induced some form of time dilation around their ship, essentially making time pass faster on board than in the real world, to give themselves time to sort out what they were going to do in this battle. James in turn briefed them on the history of the UNSC, the Covenant War and much of the current strategic situation at which they made the choice to try to drive the Covenant away from Reach, prior to making a more formal contact with us, as they don't appear to have an immediate way to get back home".

The utterly stunned silence across the bridge that greeted Cortanas matter of fact announcement that the entire foundation of the UNSCs universe had just shifted made the uncomfortable pause while she had been decrypting and digesting the data burst look almost chatty by comparison.

****0637 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>USS Odyssey, Reach Orbital Space, Epsilon Eridani System

"And this stone goes here...and I think that should be it"

"You think?"

"I'm ... sure"

"Really? Because you just said that you think?"

"Yes, I think I'm sure"

"...what does that mean?"

"Well, either I've found their bridge or found their bathroom" she shrugged as she glanced up at him from the console with an almost impish grin on her face. "Either way this should prove to be entertaining".

Daniel Jackson didn't roll his eyes, only because after spending two years with Valla, his eye muscles had become so worn out that it was physically impossible for him to do so, or so he believed some days. Instead, he just gave Valla a long look and stepped up onto the slightly raised platform in the mostly featureless room, schooling his face into an expression of calm seriousness as the hologram projected on the wall rotated around a schematic of the massive Covenant Super carrier, focused in on a tiny section of the ship, with several dozen dots of life signs tracked by the ships sensors scattered around it, one in particular glowing yellow.

"Based on what James told me, this has to be their bridge" Valla continued in a somewhat more professional tone, probably thanks to the look on Daniels face right now. "Its location is centralized, the single life sign present of this type is probably the only one of their leadership 'Prophet' cast on board, meaning that this has to be the one in charge of this whole invasion. In theory".

"Well we don't have time to waste. Alright, let's see if we can end

this before it goes any further" he said to the other as he settled himself, knowing that the rest of this battle would turn on the next few minutes.

Valla simply nodded for once without making a snarky comment, tapping several buttons on the Asgard console and twisting a final 'stone' 90 degrees from where it had been pointing-

-and the world went black around him.

****0638 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Long Night of Solace_, Inbound Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System****

As befitted one of the largest combat commands in the entire Covenant Fleet, the command centre of the _Long Night of Solace _was less a bridge for fighting the ship and more a temple dedicated to the glory of war. Almost three hundred meters long, two hundred wide and fifty tall, the vaulted front third of the room was overlayed with an utterly perfect holographic recreation of what one would see if they were standing on the very bow of the ship. A dizzying array of tactical data could be projected across it if required, but most Fleetmasters tended to leave it clear for their own eyes to make judgements on what they saw, trusting instead in the more conventional holographic tank much further back, from which any Fleetmaster senior and experienced enough to be granted command of ship a mighty warship could easily take in the largest battles at a glance.

And this was indeed, one of the largest battles seen to date in this long war against the humans.

Gleaming and in a perfectly aligned spear formation, the massed ranks of Assault Carriers and Carriers, Cruisers and Destroyers, Frigates and Corvettes stretched out around them in the holotank, the purple glow of hundreds of repulsor engines reflecting off the silver armour plating of the fleet as they powered forward implacably. Tiny dots of Seraph fighters in trios vigilantly swept the space ahead of the mass of metal, ensuring that there were none of the humans annoyingly hard to detect fusion mines laid in their path with yet others holding in swarms beside and behind their command ships for close defence. It was an unstoppable final push towards the human world that would _not _be denied, and many a warriors heart across the fleet was stirred by the glorious sight.

Hundreds of Sangheili manned consoles ahead of the command platform raised at the back of the bridge, the bulk of them charged with the operation of the ships massive array of weapons and defensive systems, while others further back were responsible for coordinating the fighter wings and close escorts whose sole purpose was to protect the flagship, with the ships navigator positioned directly ahead of the Shipmasters station, in turn placed directly ahead of and under the command platform where the Fleet Masters and Field Masters worked. Around the circumference of the command deck were clusters of other consoles manned by a mixture of Sangheili and Unggoy responsible for coordinating the vast array of secondary functions the Supercarrier served from docking and repairing lesser capital ships to ensuring the smooth preparation of the legions of ground forces preparing to land shortly on the humans world and cleanse them

from its face.

Sitting placidly on her floating throne at the Fleet Masters position that stood above all those in the room, the Prophetess of Obligation watched over the bustle of activity with an eye that saw everything and missed nothing. Old even by the extended life spans of the San 'Shyuum, the Prophet had once been the High Prophetess of Obligation. Very few, even in the Covenants upper echelons, knew that she had been deposed by the then Minister of Fortitude who had taken the name Truth when he had assumed power so many years ago. The story told was that she had gracefully stepped down to make way for a new younger trio of leaders to end the Twenty Third Age of Doubt, and usher in the 9th Age of Reclamation. Most of those who knew better were either long dead, allies of Truth or simply silent out of fear.

But she had never forgotten.

The burning memory of being deposed had blazed in her for all the long years. That Truth had allowed her to live and not had her suffer any 'unfortunate' accident was no mercy; she was a living example he kept around to intimidate anyone who had ideas about trying to depose him in turn. It was the ultimate insult; she was no longer considered her one of his enemies, but an object lesson.

>Politics was a tiresome game, but a necessary one in the hierarchy of the Covenant. Truth had played the game well, very well indeed when he had blackmailed her to step aside in his favour. He had been manipulating the San 'Shyuum and Sangheili both for decades now, playing both core factions of the Covenant against each other and ensuring that he alone remained above the squabbles that eventuated, always playing the calming peacemaker and leader as he solved the problems he had secretly created. His power was still unchallenged, even as the war with the humans dragged on for cycle after cycle and rumblings of discontent in the San 'Shyuum leadership over this fact built, none dared to confront him openly.<p>

Because at his heart Truth was not just a politician ... but a fanatic.

The Great Journey was the fundamental unifying truth that held the Covenant together, and any Hierarch would be expected to show appropriate religious piety, but Truths rapidly increasing zealotry was becoming a genuine danger to any he saw as a threat to his ascension to join the Gods, nay, to become a God ... and if that included the entire Sangheili race, then so be it.

To even whisper such heretical thoughts of their leader invited instant and painful death, to even think it was dangerous enough. But she had seen the signs in his eyes, the increasing zeal with which he scoured the ranks of the higher Covenant for any threat, any sign of heresy in those around him. She had seen the way he looked at the Sangheili, equal partners with their people no longer as a leader to his valued allies, but as a High Priest seeing heresy everywhere he turned. The Jiralhanae had been increasingly moved into his personal orbit from their peripheral position as he bided his time, clearly seeking a new army loyal only to him and him alone. The blind faith and brutal eagerness of the Jiralhanae had won great admiration in and rewards from Truth, even as the increasing incidents of heresy and rebellion in the Sangheili made him view them with increasing suspicion and distrust.

Now, it could only be a matter of when, not if Truth moved.

Even Obligation held at arm's length had heard of the whispered questions from an increasing number of Sangheili. Taught they were little more than vermin to be exterminated from the day they had entered a training crèche, most younger Sangheili accepted their orders to burn their worlds and slaughter their armies - at least at first. But with increasing numbers of Sangheili directly fighting them as the war dragged on, the more senior Sangheili were starting to almost openly wonder why the Humans had not been offered honourable submission - and even a place of honour in the Great Journey.

>For had not the Unggoy, the Mgalekgolo, the Yanme'e and even the Jiralhanae -much as they loathed being reminded of it- been defeated by the Sangheili and offered the chance to gain salvation honourably? And had the humans not proved themselves ten times as worthy as any of them for their incredible resistance - much as the foundation members of the Covenant had bitterly fought for so long before their eyes had been opened?<p>

Yet Truth, Regret and Mercy insisted on their extermination. Trained to obey, the Sangheili did so and did so well, but questions continued to linger, and in the absence of real answers the questions continued to grow ... as did other questions that naturally followed on.

Quietly. Softly. But none the less the questions did come.

And if there was ironically one thing that the leader of the Covenant would not stand having come out, it was the truth, or questioning of his particular version of it. And she had soon enough realized that if Truth was not stopped by someone, he and his fellow hierarchs would tear the Covenant apart.

Someone needed to act to stop him.

So why not someone who had proven herself worthy of the role before?

Here at least Truth's decision to keep her around and praise her as the worthy example all should follow helped her; while she had few true friends in the higher ranks of the Covenant, the mid and lower ranks remained in awe of her thanks to Truth's actions so she could count on mass popular support when she made her move, she simply needed to shore it up at the higher levels where Truth was far more feared than loved.

Thus, she needed to secure a power base and regain a level of authority back onto the Council. Not enough to challenge Truth directly and goad him into rash actions, but enough at least to place herself into a position to do so where he could not simply do away with her as she openly started to court support. And through the cultivating of her few precious contacts and careful study with Sangheili Masters Truth had little time for, she had found the lever with which she would shake High Charity to its bedrock.

Forerunner Artefacts. Artefacts that none other knew about.

Not one of the glorious sacred rings unfortunately, but from what her

laborious and painstaking investigation and translation work had uncovered this worlds should have more than enough to ensure her re-entry into the highest level of political life. She knew it was a risk - long whispered rumours suggested that Regret himself had tried to recover an entire _fleet_ of Forerunner warships from a dead world far away to bring the human war to a swift end and enforce a 'change' in his forever subordinate position to Truth. But when he had been foiled in his ploy by the lowly humans themselves, the humiliation had only shattered his stature in the triumvirate of Hierarchs, a loss from which he was continually scheming to recover with no success.

She however would not, _could_ not afford to fail as she had left High Charity in secret, meeting with the Long Night of Solace and departing to find her destiny.

Except ... when her scouts had entered the system in advance of her arrival, they had found the world where the Gods had once walked was _infested_ with more humans then the Covenant had ever seen on _any_ world in the entire Ninth Age! The presence of the humans utterly overwhelming, so much so they had questioned if it was their homeworld itself for a time, before dismissing it as too underpopulated and underdeveloped.

No, this was clearly a foundry world of the humans. And the sheer amount of orbital construction and numbers of defensive ships present made any kind of open attack an impossibility - even for this ship.

She had resisted the suggestions to call for backup from her Shipmaster, knowing if they did that Truth would be able to figure out exactly what she was up to. Instead she had banked on a daring stealth insertion to investigate the probable locations for the Forerunner installation, the Gods with them as her sketchy translations showed it should have been on the sparsely populated side of the planet. Against all odds, they had made it down undetected under the cloak of their Corvette escorts, establishing a permanent ground camp under a vast cloaking canopy. Specially trained Zealot search teams had fanned out across the wilderness, stealthy and silently trying to find her goal under the very noses of the humans, things seeming against all odds to be actually going to plan as two days passed with more and more tantalising evidence building-

Then the Demons had shown up.

Six of them. Just _six_ of the humans most feared weapon had countered her at every turn, appearing without warning and rapidly undoing her search, even as she had frantically narrowed down the location of the Forerunner outpost. Desperately she had ordered their staging ground fortified, but the overwhelming human force lead by the thrice cursed Demons had punched through, destroying her foothold and reviling the presence of the _Solace_ to them, forcing her to beat a hasty retreat to the far side of the moon and call for support, now racing against the clock to succeed in her mission before news of her actions reached High Charity.

And then, just because things could _always_ get worse, the joyful word had come down from the first of the reinforcements as they arrived that scouts Truth had dispatched based on information

recovered from the human world of Sigma Octanus IV had found that which the Covenant had searched for since its inception.

The news that one of the Sacred Rings had been found had flooded through her small fleet, leading to almost rapturous celebration before order had been restored, the knowledge that the Great Journey was almost upon them and that faith had now been substantiated with hard reality was almost overwhelming, so much so that even the Unggoy and Kig-Yar on board had stopped bickering for a time.

Obligation had not joined in the celebrations. Privately anyway.

With one of the Sacred Rings in his grasp, Truth was now all but invincible. Far worse, she had already moved past the point of no return, using every favour she had built up over cycles of plotting to take the Long Night of Solace on this mission. That in of itself was not terribly difficult, doing it without Truth finding out had been something else ... and she had failed in her covert attack, calling for more ships which would mean he was going to find out shortly what she had done.

Now the stakes become yet greater for her. Her only chance of survival given that Truth would never let her return to her 'exile' after challenging him like this was to secure the Forerunner artefacts quickly and wipe the Humans clean from the face of the planet. If she could do both, secure another piece of the Gods legacy and destroy the greatest human world found yet, not even Truth would be able to touch her ... or more probably, would dismiss her as not worth his trouble, given his newfound power.

>Wasting little time, she had taken direct command of the Fleet of Particular Justice when the first of its sub-unit squadrons had arrived to reinforce her position, pushing hard to attack the humans before they got too comfortable with their respite, hoping to deal a decisive blow to end the battle before High Charity intervened with a recall order from the Hierarchs. It was a risk to attack before the bulk of the fleet arrived, but she had little choice but to try.<p>

The humans had fought far harder than she had expected, their thrice cursed orbital platforms doing terrible damage to the fleets units as they closed. But her own ships had all but crippled their defences in turn and even made it close enough to sneak reinforcements through to her clawhold on the ground near where she was convinced the Forerunner complex was buried. Happily, the location within striking distance of the power generators for their orbital weapons systems, the elimination of which she ordered at once. And as if proof that the Gods had not yet abandoned her, the ships primary construct had actually managed to perform a rare successful intrusion into the humans data networks, discovering the presence of unsecured human navigational data inside one of their orbital stations.

And if she could gain a map that would lead the Covenant to every nest these humans had made across the stars, she would not simply survive, she would rise once again into some level of power, no matter if Truth said nay or yay!

The main body of the fleet had finally arrived under Supreme Commander Thel 'Vadamee, who had thankfully acknowledged her pre-eminence and not challenged her command, accepting without

comment his new place in command of the reserve wave of ships -for she would not share this victory with anyone else! Her forces on the ground were poised to crush the humans generators and open the way for her fleet to finish any humans left, then bombard any population centres to let her conduct her work in peace before returning to High Charity in triumph.

Except ... the plan had just fallen to pieces. Again. This time, shattered beyond all her hopes and dreams.

One ship. One insignificant, tiny, inconsequential human ship had eliminated the Penitents Scythe which had been doing a fine job of keeping the pressure on the humans with its long range energy projector, before it had vanished and reappeared moments later next to the humans shipyard complex where her special forces units were trying to recover the priceless navigational data, slaughtering the task force in little time, before now appearing directly in front of their main fleet at extreme range.

And simply waited there.

Most of her Ship Masters and the Fleet Master beside her had viewed it as nothing less than a personal challenge from the enemy Ship Master; daring them to send their most powerful ship to face them, and she had almost been flooded with requests to take up the challenge before she had curtly ordered silence, turning instead to face the Shipmaster of the Solace, a handpicked warrior loyal to her above all.

"Shipmaster" she asked slowly, her voice silencing all those around her at once. "Your analysis?"

The other turned towards her and bowed slightly at her question.

"High Born" he said carefully, "I advise caution. This human ship has proven surprisingly dangerous, with superior technology than anything we have ever seen before, and its position now could mean many things in terms of threatening the fleet".

"Indeed" she agreed, glaring at the image projected before her in the bridge holotank, recalling what this one insignificant human ship had done to some of her most powerful ships. "Curious that they have but a single ship in this fleet equipped with such technology".

"This world has far more infrastructure than we have ever seen before on a human world" the Elites hologram replied after a seconds consideration of her words. "I would speculate that as a location of great industry and Starship construction this is a prototype being tested here. Perhaps the only one of its kind. I have also seen reports of several unique types of support fighters - including one with with energy shielding and we have seen a great many Demons ... this world may be the core of their efforts to advance their technology".

"Which would make its loss a crushing defeat from which the humans may never recover" a Field Master next to -and respectfully a step back from- her declared, squeezing his hand into a fist and shaking it at the world ahead of them on the displays. "In one swift blow, we may forever cripple them, liberate yet more of the works of our Lords

and gather the data to follow them back to their Homeworld and turn it until their surface is but glass! Ensuring our victory in this life, and the next!"

There was a growl of agreement from the Fleet Masters and Ship Masters around her at the sentiment and she couldn't help but feel mild amusement at that. No matter what secret admiration many of their kind held for the humans tenacity, the truth was that glorious victory was worth far more to their kind than anything else.

"This one ship is far more dangerous than any other foe we have faced in this long war" she said in a tone of consideration, letting the clear eagerness build on the faces of those around her before she nodded once. "Fleet Master; prepare Cruiser-Lances one through five to support us. Together we will answer these humans challenge and I will personally give these worthy humans the death they deserve. Then, with their champion slain, we shall advance on the planet when their orbital weapons fall silent, by the hand of Field Master Noga 'Putumee. And with that death, the pitiful remains of their fleet cowering like vermin in their shadow will fall by our glorious Light before purifying this world in the Gods name!"

The roar of approval from the senior Sangheili at her little sermon was loud and clear, amusing her as she offset their disappointment at being denied their almost childlike need to fight the enemy in honourable single combat by acknowledging the humans ship as a worthy enemy of even her noting, ensuring any Shipmaster who could claim even a piece of a the glory would be greatly honoured, giving them an 'excuse' to throw their honourable combat rules out the nearest airlock where it belonged.

"Shipmaster, order the assigned ships to stand by to..."

She paused in her orders as the oddest sound seemed to come from the air around her, a shimmering whistle, glancing around and noting several of the Sangheili doing the same-

-just as a distortion formed in the air in front of her. She frowned at it for a moment before drawing her chair back as, incredibly, it materialized into the form of a human!

The two Honour Guards who had been standing as still as statues left and right of her chair were in motion even before the figure had fully formed, stepping together to shield her and bringing their energy staves down viciously, the golden blades igniting with the same white fire as the Energy Swords ... only to pass straight through the figure without any effort or effect.

>It looked somewhat absurd; her two crack bodyguards standing there with their weapons pressing against each other with a light hissing in the middle of the 'human' ... and clearly at a loss for what to do as the human in turn glanced down at the blades inside his 'body' before almost impertinently waving his hands in a dismissive gesture at them as he stepped forward 'up' the shafts of the weapons towards her rippling slightly in a clear holographic projection.<p>

Unexpectedly fascinated, she re-schooled her face into its usual placid mask as she floated forward, a brief gesture silencing the cries of the various Sangheili Masters around her who, denied the weapons custom forbid them from holding in her presence, had moved

forward with a tense air to flank the Honour Guards, ready to dive in with the hands alone if need be to protect her. A second, stronger gesture caused them and her bodyguards both to back up, their eyes all burning with zeal as the holographic protection watched them back off, before turning to study her.

It was an unimpressive specimen decided, even by human standards. Its head would barely have come up to the height of the average Sangheili's shoulders. It was dressed in incredibly drab green cloth of some kind and had some kind of vision device over its eyes, probably for computer interface work, or possibly some kind of sensor overlay.

But its eyes behind that device...
>They held no fear.<p>

She had seen humans in the flesh several times before, prisoners brought for interrogation and execution mostly. Their eyes had been filled with emotions she could pick out of any species. Oh certainly there had been defiance and hate, contempt and rage...but mostly fear by the time _she _had gotten to whatever the Sangheili had left of them.

But this human...despite the fact that his world was moments away from burning, _he _was studying _her _as if _she _was the curiosity, and _he _the one with the power of life and death over her.
>It was an unsettling feeling, one she had only felt once before, on the day when Truth had deposed her ... and it threw her off long enough for the human to speak directly to her.<p>

"I take it you are the one in charge of all of this?"

She actually blinked. The sheer _impudence _of the creature, questioning her as if _she_ was _his_ underling! Oh, she understood its language as all of those standing around her did; learning the human language known as English was required for any Sangheili who aspired to achieve a Mastery rank for to know the enemy was to know how to defeat them, a Sangheili truism she embraced. She herself had learned it from the Prophet of Tolerance himself but had rarely had cause to use it...

>But she had never thought she would be questioned by a human in its own language before this day!

"I am" she replied finally, forcing a mildly amused tone into her voice as she sought to reclaim the conversation, deciding to both test her language skills and mock the other, leaning calmly back in her throne as she did so. "If you have come to beg for Mercy, I am afraid he is still back on High Charity".

The barks of derisive laughter from around her suggested that the cluster of Sangheili around her got the joke, although her two bodyguards did not so much as blink, standing in that seemingly relaxed state of readiness that could explode into action without the slightest warning, their eyes never leaving the hologram as it frowned before reaching up to adjust its eye piece, clearly not amused especially by her retort.

A pity that.

But she supposed Honour Guards were not selected for their sense of

humour or strategic brilliance.
>Just their killing skills.<p>

"... okay. Look, you need to stop your fleet, right now".

"Do I?" she asked evenly, as she glanced at the displays showing the fleet was arranging itself to her orders, breaking up their formation as cruisers move forward to flank the Solace as they sped ahead, there to thicken her ships already formidable firepower into an utterly overwhelming first strike that would have flash boiled a city instantly and was sure to be enough to kill this single human ship. "What possible reason, vermin, would, I have to defy my mandate and will of the Gods?"

"Well first, my name is Daniel Jackson and not Vermin" the other said, and she ignored the hissing from around her as the Sangheili expressed their outrage at the arrogance of a mere human contradicting her, let alone the insult she knew they would feel at it naming itself. "I am on board the ship in front of you, the one I am sure you just saw just destroyed many of your ships " the human continued, the boast earning new glares that Obligation quietly felt could have slain this human alone without touching him, had the human been foolish enough to be physically in the room with her officers. "We are not representatives of the humans of this world. In terms you can understand, we have travelled from another universe, from a different Earth and different Galaxy. You have seen what we can do, and I'm here to deliver a warning. We are not going to stand aside as you kill hundreds of millions of innocent people on this planet. Respectfully, as a clearly advanced culture, I am asking you to stop this slaughter. Just walk away. There don't need to be any more deaths today ".

The angry hissing from the Shipmaster in front of her at the sheer arrogance projected by this human was rather impressive, but discipline held as she simply held up a hand, the noise falling away quickly as she studied the other closely, wondering at the projection and its expression. Was that confidence in its eyes, or simple desperation? She could not tell. Deceit and deception were as natural to these humans as breathing after all, and she would not put it past any of them to make up such an absurd story as part of a bluff to try and trick them...

But still...the burning wrecks of her force attacking the humans space station stood in silent testimony to the potency of this human ship.

>But after a moments doubt, her resolved hardened. She had to proceed forward, regardless of the risk. If she did not, at *best*, she would suffer humiliation in the eyes of her people. At worst

...

"Then why have you not stopped us, Daniel Jackson?" she asked calmly as their forces continued to advance steadily in their tight formation that would let them merge their magnetic guidance waves, merging a hundred plasma torpedoes into a single compressed spear that no ship ever seen, perhaps not even the mighty Forerunner Dreadnaught that reposed in High Charity, could possibly withstand. "A true warriors strength is shown by his deeds. A true warrior acts, he does not talk! You say you are here to protect this world and that you can do so? Then you should have done so - would have done so!" she threw back at him, her voicing ringing firmly

across the room as she slowly raised her volume and tempo, long practice letting her true majesty flow forth once again for the first time in an age as she felt the approval rising from those around her.

"I thought to save lives - yours included" the other replied, his voice losing some of its calm and becoming more expressive, almost annoyed she thought in delight. "This is not a question about taking loses, this is a question of _survival. _For you _and _the humans here. We have no desire to kill you , and you've seen what we can do-"

"And now you will what _we _can do!" she thundered back at him switching from amused calm to a potent controlled rage; a tactic that had served her kind well for a long time as she played to their restrained anger, slowly floating forward towards the projection and letting her throne drift upwards as it did until she was looking down on it, falling back easily into the same imperious manner she had used when _she _had stood in judgment over those who had defied the Covenant. "Your actions, in raising a hand to defend these who have defiled a world of the Gods, condemns you to damnation, no matter the sacrifices we may be called to make to ensure it will be so" she continued, earning an loud roar from the senior Sangheili around her. "Your stupidity, in standing against those enacting the will of the Gods, damns you eternally to be left behind on the Great Journey" she continued, making a sharp gesture at the ships Shipmaster as another roar sounded in response from the Elites around her, who all took a step closer in unison, the crack of their feet echoing across the vast room. The Shipmaster she had signalled in turn barked his own command into the lower areas of the ship, a red glow building across their hull almost at once along the flanks of the Super Carrer matched by their close escorts as the group powered hundreds of Plasma Torpedo lines, targeting the human ship that _dared _to stand in their way as she raised her chin and sneered at the other. "If you are truly not of this universe as you claim, then I give you this one chance to flee my wraith now and never return. But should you stay then you will know, for the short time that you live, that regardless of what it may cost us your destruction is and forever WILL be, the will of the Gods. And we? _We _are their _instruments!_"

The roar raised in salute to her was most heartening; even the normally stoic Honour Guards roared out their approval as she raised her hand slowly and regally, locking her gaze with the human as orange targeting circles flowed across the massive holographic display behind him, all of them aligning as they and their escorts moved into strike range and locked on for a single terrible strike that _nothing _could withstand.

And to her delight, the human who had held her gaze for several seconds finally closed his eyes and let his head drop as its projection faded, leaving only the roaring of the Fleetmaster led them in a recitation of the opening verse of the Writ of Union, as was the Sangheili custom to salute a High Prophet; declaring that all who walked the path would find salvation, even in death...

And for just a moment, she allowed herself to glory in the rapturous thunder of their voices as the entire command centre now joined in as one, knowing the Gods were with her and that she had truly started her ascension back into the halls of power.

>Then she dropped her arm sharply, signalling the Shipmaster of the

Long Night of Solace and the Fleetmaster commanding their escort screen both, to open fire.

And as the forward plasma torpedo lines collated the plasma with the appropriate vectors into a half dozen plasma torpedoes, the defensive shields around the emitters dropped for just half a second to let the balls of energy launch...

****0641 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Long Night of Solace _**Deck 77, Subdeck K, Compartment 47-A, Inbound, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System**

The Unggoy Kwassass knew his place aboard the Covenant Supercarrier Long Night of Solace. He was there to be trod upon under the boots of its glorious Sangheili Officers. He was to clean, to scrub, to wait in the shadows for orders, and never dare speak, unless spoken to first.

Such was the lot of an Unggoy in life.

Waddling through the bowls of the ship, Kwassass marvelled at the sheer open size of the cargo decks and the power surging along the plasma conduits along the roof far above him, luxuriating in the waste heat from them that so effortlessly made the room gloriously warm. After spending every day of his childhood freezing, watching one family member after the other succumb to the blue death, heat was something he could never have enough of, and he marvelled at the Covenant's ability to produce so much that they could waste it heating rooms so large as this!

>Kwassass's tribe had the duty of tending to the massive amounts of heavy excavation equipment stored in this part of the ship. Countless lines of gleaming diggers, antigravity earth conveyors, portable micro-energy power units were sorted in perfectly neat rows, with a dozen squatting, but still enormous, Scarab excavation units brooding over the area.<p>

Why exactly the Sangheili were so often digging in the dirt confused Kwassass. As a young packmate living on Balaho, he had been forced to dig holes to shelter in from the freezing cold of the two winters many times, and had never found anything but yet more miserably frozen dirt that gave way only reluctantly to his frantic clawing, despite all the legends of pockets of warm methane existing that one could find if they dug deep enough.

>Still, it was not his place to question those above him, as the Deacons so often lectured them, so he did his job and kept the equipment in perfect working order. All of the equipment in fact had been ready to deploy days ago when they had landed in a glorious wide desert that was almost too hot if such a thing was possible, but just as they had been starting to deploy, the order had come to retreat. Luckily, they had been able to recover all their equipment that had been sent down to the docking spire for all of his tribe knew that if they had lost any of it, the reprisals...

Barking nervously to clear his mind of the thoughts of what their enraged Sangheili overseers would have done to them if they had been forced to abandon valuable equipment, Kwassass waddled by the crates, barking greetings to his fellow tribe members as they all worked hard, trying to ignore the smell of expelled gas from the Huragok floating around above them.

>All in all, life was good for the Unggoy aboard this ship. There was never any fighting against humans, plenty of warmth and the ship was big enough that the Kig-Yar were kept away from them and, excepting the regular religious services the deacons were always forcing them to attend, the Unggoy were mostly left alone to do their work, so long as it got done and otherwise ignored.<p>

All of which meant that when a brilliant beam of white light passed through the ceiling to hit the floor with a shimmering, chiming sound and materialize into a dark black cylinder, the bulk of the Unggoy simply turned and stared in some confusion for the first few heartbeats, their survival instincts not _quite _so finely tuned as their brethren on the front lines.

_Then _they ran screaming with their hands in the air for the neatest exit.

Kwassass, closest to the sudden physical reality of the _thing _appearing in front of him was quite literally frozen with fear and shock even as his packmates did the far more logical thing of running for it. The annoyed chirps of any number of Huragok heading this way filled the air as the screaming from the rest of the Unggoy faded, and he almost distantly studied the cylinder as he fought the urge to curl into a ball and hide, recognizing it as a human device of some kind, with a strange yellow circular icon prominent on its side of three black wedges extending from a black circle in the middle.

Next to it some kind of control panel was glowing, several coloured lines rapidly moving from left to right as an evil whine started to build up rapidly, as if mocking the frantic sounds of the Huragok swarming closer, the noise finally shattering the fear that had held his legs frozen as Kwassass spun around screaming and started to run for it-

He would be dead before his foot hit the ground.

When the condition $T = 0$ was met on three separate clocks, a microprocessor activated inside the outer frame of the Mark IX casing. One of five separate and independent computer systems designed to rapidly failover in the event any of them malfunctioned, the specifications and engineering of Samantha Carter once again proved its worth as the first computer worked without issue, first activating a primitive subspace transponder and squirting a data burst out to the _Odyssey's _fire control computer to let it know that Armageddon had arrived, before getting started on making it happen.

That done, it sent a burst of energy down two dozen circuits, identical in length, terminating in blocks of high explosives shaped into a perfect interlocking sphere, triggering the detonators placed in each block simultaneously, more than enough to blast the entire casing and the incredibly expensive technology inside into scrap ... except for the fact that events would now move _so_ quickly, even the powerful explosion wouldn't have a fraction of the time needed to propagate that far.

Mathematically worked out to several decimal points, the shaped charge detonations combined and joined into a uniform wave, pressing mostly _inward _on the ball of metal placed at the centre of the ring, a sphere of Plutonium the size of a tennis ball. High explosives, slow

explosives, uranium 'tamper' shielding; all of it worked together like a symphony building to a perfect crescendo, smashing the ball of metal from every direction with equal force, leaving it no room to try and distort, warp or deform. Compressed into a smaller and smaller space, atoms were pressed closer and closer together until finally, and inevitably-

Fission happened.

At some point in the imploding material, a neutron was introduced to a Plutonium atom. The Strong Nuclear Force invited it in and, in return, the neutron wrecked the place, destabilizing the dance in its electron shell until finally, the entire atom was 'split', releasing Gamma Radiation, among other types of energy ... and two to three more neutrons.

Those liberated Neutrons in turn easily found a number of atomic house parties of their own to crash, each releasing another two to three new home wreckers and so on; an uncontrolled chain reaction impossible to stop underway even as the sphere _continued _to be squeezed into a tighter and tighter space that made it increasingly impossible for the exponentially growing storm of Neutrons to _miss _hitting their targets, even if they had wanted to.

>Vastly faster than any living being could perceive, the reaction increased rapidly, doubling again and again as the yield as the energy released from the fissile chain reaction started to now push back against the forces trying to squish what remained of the plutonium together from the outside. Matching and then _ridiculously_ exceeding the force of the implosion trying to push inwards, the yield racing past those of the crude bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But for all that terrible energy and for what it could do to the Solace and its crew from the inside, this was but a mere spark plug for the_ real _bomb was still patiently waiting a third of a meter away.

Nanoseconds after the first fission had taken place, an increasing wave of Gamma Rays, X-Rays and Neutrons from the reaction had spread out spherically from the core. In conventional multi-stage fusion bomb designs as used on Earth, the massive energy release would then be manipulated carefully to induce the main fusion reaction in a 'secondary' device, releasing hundreds of times more energy than the initial fission reaction alone could do, generally fusing lithium-6 into heavier tritium atoms and releasing vastly more energy in the process.

Unlike your average H-Bomb however, there was a cone shaped plate of Beryllium sitting between the primary and secondary components. 'Transparent' to X-Rays but a Neutron deflector, the plate survived only for a matter of a few more nanoseconds before the massive explosion of gamma rays from the rapidly expanding initiation vaporized it, but it served its purpose by 'turning back' the first wave of the liberated neutrons that would otherwise have impacted the secondary and started the reaction prematurely. Behind the Beryllium in turn was a shaped energy field, essentially a primitive Goa'uld forcefield that inverted the shielding effect of the Beryllium to allow Neutrons through while deflecting the massive burst of Gamma and X-Ray radiation away.

Combined together, the Beryllium and the Forcefield effectively shielded the Secondary unit from the initial burst of energy just long enough, so that when the wave of Neutrons liberated from the primary at the height of its fission reaction arrived, it was not a small trickle slowly increasing in intensity but a massive hammer blow of energy that saturated it all at once. The secondary itself was a plate, concave in shape, the curve matching that of the plutonium ball to ensure that it was bombarded evenly by the spherical explosion of energy. And it was made of Naquadriah.

Naquadahs incredibly unstable and energetic brother in law, Naquadriah could be induced to release a lot of its energy quite easily, barely even needing an invitation to do so in fact, seeming to reach super-criticality at the drop of a hat, as Daniel Jackson had found out to his misfortune many years ago on Langara. >But this was something else entirely.
Gatecrashed by an utterly _obscene_ number of neutrons without warning, what had been a ten kiloton detonation from the primary triggered a release of energy tens of _millions_ of times larger, the entire process taking place before either Kwassass or any of the Huragok floating in and huffing in annoyance could even perceive that they were dead and that the omonius black cylinder of the Mark IX now had been concerned to pure energy.

Energy sufficient to vaporize a Stargate that did not care about how it had been brought into existence. Did not care about what universe it was in. Energy that only sought a single thing; to expand from its incredibly compressed state until it reached equilibrium.

And to hell with any Grunts, Engineers, Prophets, Ships or Dogma in its way.

****0641 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>UNSC _**Trafalgar**_**, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System**

"Sir, general broadcast from the Odyssey!"

Danforth Whitcomb's head snapped around from the tactical display he had been studying, having just finished his conversation with Keyes as the Covenant fleet became a more pressing concern to him. His tactical display indeed showed the Covenant fleet approaching Reach was now shifting their course slightly, the fleet moving as one in a grudgingly impressive course shift for so many vessels to directly bear down on the tiny icon of the _Odyssey_, still sitting directly in their path as if it had no care in the world for the terrifying firepower it was about to be subjected to. The enemy was already entering extreme Torpedo range and the spikes of Beta Radiation were close to going off the scale as they _all_ powered their heavy Plasma Torpedo launchers, red light collecting along their bows as they prepared to fire.

"Specifics?" he demanded as he focused his gaze on the Communications Officer.

"Just a single message in the clear; Prepare for extreme scale nuclear detonation"

Whitcomb blinked, but didn't hesitate. Everything he had seen this ship do thus far suggested that if they were warning him of an 'extreme scale' detonation, then he would be damn well stupid if he didn't take it very _very _seriously. Not even acknowledging his subordinate, the Admiral instead stabbed his finger out at his own board, hitting the button that would instantly link him into FLEETCOM-7, the fleetwide channel to all ships and fighters and override all other communications traffic on their digital COM units.

"All units, Trafalgar-Actual, I am declaring code BANDERSNATCH in the Covenant fleet, watch yourselves!"

Three seconds passed, just enough time for the few Longsword pilots out there who had not done so to lock down their gold tinted visors and wheel into the shadows of the larger ships where they could and for the larger ships -or more accurately their AI's- to lock down fast operating blast doors over any unfiltered windows and protect their more sensitive sensors-

And a new star was given birth.

The blue/white flash would have instantly burned out any retina for twenty thousand kilometres without the benefit of some kind of protection and even at such a distance, it was enough to briefly light up the night sky of Reach like a false dawn. Disintegrating the bulbous bow of the Supercarrier as it formed, the ball of energy expanded faster than could be perceived by organics, vaporizing the thirty kilometre long ship in less than a second as the fireball expanded through it, tearing apart the already disintegrating Cruisers in the tight escort formation almost at the same moment. The Shipmasters had just enough time to perceive a gloriously pure white light as the Prophetess had promised them, more than one embracing it as they recalled the news that the Sacred Ring had been found and decided that the Great Journey had indeed started.

The Bulk of the fleet further away had a little more time to react, but not nearly enough to do anything to alter their fate. Sensors and communications systems were scrambled by the massive energy pulse, their defensive shields shimmering a faint silver for moments before they buckled under the intense Gamma radiation seething from the funeral pyre of the Solace, the closer ships' outer hulls sublimating even before the blast wave made up of the Supercarrier and its escorts smashed into and shredded them, adding yet more glowing debris to the expanding wave of death.

Further out still were the lighter support ships - the Frigates and Corvettes guarding the five flanks of the fleet. Although the energy of the bomb was steadily dispersing through the sheer volume of space it was expanding into, it still retained more than enough power to smash into the much smaller and weaker ships like the first of an angry God. The radiation burst burned through shields before kilotons and megatons worth of debris crashed through the outer formation and into unyielding metal, destroying some ships outright and 'merely' crippling others, adding yet more debris to that which mere seconds ago been the pride of the Covenant Fleet. Ultimately, a mere _three _Assault Carriers at the far rear of the formation rode out the event more or less undamaged, their heavy shielding and armour enough at that distance to survive the fastest and dodge the worst. Another dozen or so other ships through pure chance or great skill managed to

stagger away from the blast zone without being smashed to bits, clawing for the dubious safety of the reserve fleet near the moon as their belief in their superiority evaporated just as quickly as their brothers had.

"External sensors ... restored" the Sensor officer on board the Trafalgar called out, finally, thirty seconds of frantic work after the system had shut down to protect its delicate antenna and aerials from the massive energy pulse that had pegged the scales before the hard shutdown had been mediated by the ships AI. The massive screens that dominated the forward bulkhead of the Carriers commander centre switched from hissing static to a test pattern for a second, and then-

>Vice Admiral Whitcomb stood slowly from his chair as he stared at the screen, part of him noticing the way the chatter across the bridge seemed to hesitate and then fade out as everyone else stood or moved to see the picture. It was a moment that he would remember for the rest of his life - a moment *everyone* *in* the Fleet would remember for the rest of their life indeed. History would call it a turning point, but for the thousands of UNSC personnel in the fleet, it would simply live in an eternal 'now'.

The blinding white flash had 'faded' -relatively speaking- somewhat to a blue/white glow, still more than bright enough to dominate the scene, with a slowly expanding shell of blue, orange and red plasma softly wreathing it; an artificial nebula that eclipsed the moons behind it, one made up of the ships and bodies of the Covenants unstoppable fleet making where they had died in one horrible moment of unparalleled power.

"Sensors..." Whitcomb called out, swallowing slightly past a suddenly dry mouth as he glanced across at the officer leading that division before heading back to the screen, "do you show any hard contacts from the Covenant fleet?"

"There is a hell of a lot of radiation out there Sir" the other said as the officer formed himself to turn back to his board, Whitcombs order shattering the silence and forcing everyone to start refocusing on their own systems as communications links disrupted across the fleet were restored. "I'm cross linking and ... okay. I've got tracks on what look like a half dozen shattered ships, or pieces of them anyway, at the edge of the explosion" he said, working his board to make red icons flick onto the screen around the periphery of the explosion, secondary screens presenting highly pixilated but none the less recognizable images of shattered Covenant ships, the hulks pinwheeling across the sky with fire and gasses streaming out of hull breaches and shattered hull sections. "I'm also seeing quite a bit of debris ... but not enough to account for the former mass projections readings -"

"Yes you do Lieutenant" Arthur cut in across the officer on the bridge speakers, all manner of sensors analysis data streaming across the man's screens as Whitcomb stepped over to watch. "Spectral analysis of that cloud shows it is almost entirely composed of vaporized remains and particulate matter from Covenant Starships. Density analysis, and replaying the tracks before we lost track of the ships deeper in the formation gives a better than ninety percent probability that almost the entire Covenant formation has been destroyed - probably a few survivors at the rear where we can't see right now, but ..."

"What about the _Odyssey_?"

"I've got them" the sensor officer said, masking his irritation with the AI jumping into his job well, the Admiral thought. "They are underway at high speed, outbound from the explosion area".

"Heading?"

"If they hold their current turn ... tracks show they'll come around back towards the Covenant ships orbiting Csodaszarva; looks like they're going after the rest of the enemy fleet". A blue dot was highlighted against the slowly expanding remains of the awesome detonation, a projected course track showing that she was already reversing her course and heading back towards the moon the remains of the Covenant fleet were orbiting, the course projections showing the two tracks intersecting just around the curve of the moon the Covenant would soon move behind, assuming they didn't wise up and get the hell out of here before _Odyssey_ caught up to them.

****0643 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Ascendant Justice_, Low Orbit, Csodaszarva, Epsilon Eridani System****

The Silence in the Command Centre was utterly deafening.

Even the Unggoy manning stations inside the room were atypically subdued, as if they feared the Sangheili would take out what had just happened on _them_ if they reminded their betters that they were both present and convenient targets to vent against. But the silence simply endured without any reaction or actions from the most exalted of the Sangheili in the room. Dressed in gleaming purple armor, the Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice looked out upon what remained the fleet that been trusted to his hands by the three Hierarchs themselves ... and saw nothing but dust and echoes.

"Supreme One" a voice from the side of the Command Centre finally shattered the oppressive silence, "the ... 'Odyssiiee' is heading for us ... shall we begin the turn to meet it?"

Thel 'Vadamee ignored the horrible pronouncing of the human name from the minor Sangheili as he turned away from the display, feeling a twitch at the question from the other, who alone out of the crew in this place had dared to say anything after the magnitude of their defeat had become clear..

>Oh how easy it would be, oh how badly his warrior heart shouted at him to agree with the order, to roar out their defiance by reforming their fleet and coming around for one last battle against the enemy, to and try and salvage some shred of honour. Even if he knew they would find only death here today, dying in the glory of battle as opposed to returning to their brothers, alive, defeated more terribly than any fleet in the proud history of the Covenant! To live and _escape_, to stand _alive_ before the Council with this failure draped around him while so many of their brothers had died was more than any Sangheili could possibly bare!

But he could not give the order.

As much as he desperately longed to do so.

Doing so would be condemning the last of his command to little more than ignoble suicide at the hands of these human's terrible new weapons. Only his ship, linked as it had been to the command systems on board the bridge of the Solace, had recorded the transmission from these interlopers and the claims they had made ... and he knew to simply pass the almost unbelievable information it on to a courier would do little; none in the council would believe the story unless he swore by it, in front of all of those who had been his peers.

Beyond that, the practical logistics were that only his ship and its pair of escorting Cruisers remained undamaged; every remaining ship in his fleet had been damaged in some way during the earlier battle - and the few ships that had survived the explosion were in no shape to offer battle, as they staggered back to his formation.

Damn these humans to a thousand hells for this! And damn him for letting it happen! For not speaking up

It would be so easy to charge the human ship, in a single defiant act even now that would tell them that the Covenant were never defeated, even if you destroyed every last one of them...
>But no. He had a much higher duty now â€| and so he shook his head at the underling ... and even this small action took more strength than anything else he had ever done in his life.<p>

"No" he said, forcing the agonizing word out as he set himself. "Set a course away from this system. Take us to where we will tell our brothers tail of dying in glory against impossible odds before we uselessly join them. Take us to where we can look upon the Glory of the Gods made manifest â€| and not on the shame of utter defeat".

"But ... Supreme One" the Sangheili stuttered out, shock and anger bordering on rage lacing his voice at the unexpected order before the two Mgalekgolo standing guard at the back of the command deck -and sworn to protect the Supreme Commander with their lives- rumbled warningly, the green glare of their visual sensors tilting slightly to fix the other with their gaze, causing the junior officer to lower his gaze respectfully and step back, appropriately chastised, before gathering his thoughts and trying again in a calmer tone. "Supreme Commander, the shame of withdrawing-"

"Will be mine, and mine alone" he cut the other off pointedly. "No-one else will share in this decision, no-one!" he added with a firm glare at the half dozen other Sangheili around him who started to step forward, their eyes saying that they were ready to stand beside him and defend him from taking the blame for something that was by all rights that of the Prophetess who had taken the burden of commandâ€| but under his withering gaze they held their place, bowing slightly all away from his expression as they accepted silently, his choice and all it meant.

A dead Prophetess could not be blamed for a disaster on this scale, nor would the Hierarchs allow it to be so, he knew this full well from personal experience. Only a living Supreme Commander would be sufficient to bear the shame of this without needing any other to

suffer, allowing the many tens of thousands who would return still alive with him to avoid being painted with the stigma of defeat and continue to serve. It was the only way to allow a full warning of what had happened here today to be heard in full.

Such was the price of command.

"Signal the Prophets Blade and Shadow of Sanghelios to remain in their positions and observe human activity until contacted" he ordered one of his Fleetmasters wearing light grey armour, who saluted and turned to make it happen, the Special Operations Corvettes sulking powered down around some of the larger planets further out in this system well equipped to observe and watch, hopefully obtaining more information about these new humans in the process. "All other ships are to Activate Void-Space Drives on my direct order, none are to remain here and die uselessly" he continued, turning back to stare down the one who had challenged him with a level gaze. "They will head for the ring of the Gods, command passes to the Shipmaster of the Exacting Glory" he ordered, knowing that there what was left of the fleet would find solace and a renewed faith there, trying hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice born of the knowledge that he would never see its majesty. "Set our own course for High Charity".

"By your will" the other said bowing stiffly but without further complaint or hesitation as he turned away and returned to his station. The tremble of his jaws mildly amused 'Vadamee for a moment as he recalled himself at that age, when he had been forced to slay his friend and comrade Zhar to save the life of the High Prophet of Truth so many cycles ago...

This young one would survive and grow the stronger for it as he had.

Unggoy started chatted away again in their high pitched voices as they prepared the ship for transit, their relief at leaving in stark contrast to the stoic professionalism of the Sangheili, the pride as they had watched their fleet sally forth in an unstoppable tide moments ago now as shattered as their fleet, as they calculated the optimum jump path to High Charity and the fate they all knew awaited the one in purple armor. The Sangheili on the bridge remained silent out of respect for this, letting him have his peace while he could, as they all knew what would be coming.

The calculations were made and passed around across tight beam links as energy was diverted from the massive reactors at the heart of their ships to the enormous Slip Space drives buried in the fleet of ships. Energy conduits came to life along their outer hulls, Cherenkov radiation building around the ships as they accelerated as one, ships professionally slotting into positions next to each other as they picked up speed, running away from the Humans. Blue flashes arced around the pitiful remains of the Fleet of Particular Justice as space twisted, warped and consumed the accelerating warships in giant whirlpools of blue light.

And at 06:45:02 Earth Standard Time, history recorded the first ever rout of a Covenant fleet at the hands of a human one.

064*5 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>UNSC _**Trafalgar**_**, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani

System**

Almost deafening cheers broke out on the bridge of the Trafalgar as the last damaged Covenant ships vanished into slipspace, the stunned disbelief of moments ago replaced with the wold abandon of a crew celebrating not just the fact that they were alive and when by all rights they should have been dead hours ago but the fact that the Covenant had lost more ships and crew in this one battle than had been destroyed by the UNSC in the last five years of war!

And then they had run! Run with their tails between their legs because they had been defeated. Something that had never happened before in the history of the Covenant-Human war!

"Okay people settle down" Whitcomb ordered with the slightest of smiles across his face as he waved his people back to their stations, withholding the glares of censure that he would have given them on any other day of the week for such an outburst. "We've still got work to do; signal the fleet to stand down to condition two and stand by for redeployment orders".

Quickly, the crew got back to work with a much improved step in their stride, starting to coordinate with the other ships as everyone took stock of the situation around Reach, took a deep breath, and attended to their duties. Some communications officers busily briefed the disbelieving Generals and Colonels downstairs on what that massive explosion lighting the night sky had been and the responses that came back varied from 'no really, what just happened?' all the way through to 'The damn navy actually did something useful for a change? Well fuck me!'.
>And, in all cases, the profanity laden insults were gallantly allowed to slide by generally still just too damn happy to still be alive right now.<p>

Other people on the bridge worked to organize the scramble of the specialist squadrons of Search and Rescue birds from their flight decks, flocks of specially equipped Pelicans fanning out across the various combat zones to look for any survivors in the Battlespace that stretched from pole to pole around Reach, passing inbound Longswords holding tired yet equally jubilant crews as they returned home to the ships and ground bases they had come from.

Whitcomb was content to let his people handle the 'housekeeping' without his micromanagement, working his consoles quietly to study the 'big picture' and wincing at the butchers bill as Arthur efficiently put together the data for him. Half his original fleet had been destroyed during the first push of the enemy fleet, although the one good thing about fighting over Reach was that unlike normal engagements where the UNSC would be forced to abandon salvageable hulls when they retreated, here he could mark at least a dozen ships that could be returned to service, or at least stripped for useful components, and so he placed orders to organize quick return trips for the crews and workers of the untouched Anchor-5 and Anchor-6 shipyards, designating the hulls for his fleet tugs and salvage ships. Switching pages to the ships still reporting as 'alive', he quickly and efficiently moved down the list, ordering almost half of them to report to the various drydocks after a look at their damage and munitions status indicators, while most of the rest he sent out to sweep the battlefield in three six ship task groups, looking to make damn sure their situation was secure while holding the Tragalfar

and Pillar of Autumn together right here as he tried to get a grasp on the strategic implications of all of this. Reach had been compromised which meant ...

Honestly, he didn't know _what _it meant. Even the thought of trying to evacuate the planet and move all its heavy industry, strategic infrastructure ... he shook his head at the impossibility of the idea. But with what had to have been the biggest and probably only Covenant fleet in this part of space smashed, vaporized and generally just blown the fuck up, they probably had plenty of time to figure it out.

Switching screens, he found the prowlers attached to his command were still active and online, selecting the UNSC _Luna Eclipse _from the short list and issuing it standby orders to prepare report to Earth as soon as he could put together his report. Which he would start as soon as he could figure out exactly how he was going to explain this to Terrance Hood, closing his eyes and rubbing them for a moment as he tried to formalize a message to his superior.

Then he opened his eyes again as he remembered the last battle zone in Reach Orbit that hadn't been cleared yet and he kicked himself for forgetting something so critical.

"Ops" he demanded, turning to glance at the officer in charge, "what's the SITREP on Gamma Station? Have we heard from Blue Team?"

"The _Savannah _has been forwarding COM intercepts to us since the last of the Covenant ships in the area were toasted and I've run them through the RED FLAG decryption sequences - as ordered. It looks like the Spartans are heavily engaged but are just about to complete their mission and withdraw. There are still a _lot _of enemy troops left on board, at least several hundred from the number of transmissions we're picking up. I don't know if _they_ know their fleet has been destroyed and they're cut off..."

"They'll never surrender" the Admiral grunted slightly at the implied question, knowing that in similar situations throughout the war, the Covenant forces had generally chosen 'death by banzai charge' over any number of offers of surrenderâ€" before the humans had stopped bothering to make them. "Tell the Savannah to make damn sure she keeps a blanket jam in place over all Covenant chatter, I don't want them squirting a databurst out to some stealth ship out there; until the Spartans confirm their mission is successful my contingency orders remain in place".

"Admiral, I have Odyssey tracking inbound" Arthur cut into his orders, the hologram reappearing on the pedestal next to him. "They pulled a fast orbit around the moon to sweep the Covenant fleets exit vector before heading back and decelerating. Looks like they're sweeping the debris from their end and are on an intercept course for Reach orbit, and us".

"Probably the Autumn more than us" he corrected the other with a slight smirk, "they really love that ship - probably because that Spartan with them pointed it out I suppose. Tell Keyes we're shifting orbit to Nav Beacon RA-21 and put a class 2 exclusion zone around it. Oh and have the Savannah keep a tight quarantine around Gamma Station until the Spartans confirm mission accomplished, than put a MAC round

through the stations primary life support system. "Just blockade the place and let the bastards run out of air. We'll have a boarding party clean up the mess some time tomorrow".

****0645 Hours, September 22nd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>USS Odyssey, Reach Orbital Space, Epsilon Eridani System

It is well that war is so terrible, lest we grow too fond of it Hank Landry thought to himself as he looked out the bridge windows and studied the remains of the Covenant fleet. It was one of many quotes he knew from route and although he had used it often, he had never _felt _it to be so true until today.

The high energy event of the Mark IX initiation had dissipated now, but the evidence of its fury was still plentiful. In a vacuum with limited means to radiate away energy, countless pieces of debris still glowed, more than enough to illuminate the field of what had been hundreds of massive warships, the occasional flash of something heavier being repelled by the ships shields as they skirted the edge of debris field illuminating smaller fragments briefly as they passed silently by the graveyard of what had once been proud ships, but were now little more than a navigational hazard.

>He had toyed with not looking over the sensor of the explosion before he had decided it was his duty to do so, studying the clean and cold numbers that tallied the life signs from before and after the detonation inside the Covenant fleet. The Super Carrier alone had carried over half a million distinct life signs, the larger of its support ships carrying close to ten thousand personnel each - even the *smallest* of the Covenant ships had carried almost a thousand personnel on board.

And by his order, hundreds of these ships had died. He had just killed more people than any US General had ordered killed in a single moment in the history of the US Military. Probably _any _General from Earth - his Earth- come to think of it.

It was hardly the first time in his life he had killed of course. He had taken the lives of men in Vietnam and in the Gulf, good men, bad men, he didn't know, but he had ended their lives and dreams on the express orders of his Government, becoming the 'by other means' in Clausewitz's famous quote. He in turn had become the one that ordered men to do so when he had joined the SGC; forced to make calls he had never expected to make from the order to launch a cruise missile filled with a chemical weapon that would kill friend and foe alike to his recommendation to wipe out beings that by any other name qualified as _Gods, _before they wiped them out first.

But he had never had to condemn anything like so many people to death in a single moment like this before, all but of few of whom would have been killed in complete ignorance. He had never been mocked for trying to give his foe a chance at survival, even a chance to just _step back and talk, _to consider their situation before going and further ... and it was a sobering realisation for him. He shouldn't have expected it to, after all he had barely given them a bloody nose before demanding they withdraw ... but even so...

As a pilot through the Cold War, he had lived through an age where nuclear weapons by the tens of thousands had been pointed across the

world at just about every place you could find on a map, where tensions had spiked to the point that Armageddon had always seemed inevitable and Generals openly debated with politicians if they wanted to lose small by striking before the other guy, or lose big by waiting and risking their first strike ... while praying that all the propaganda they had read about the other side was really just that and they were actually sane people who didn't want to see the end of the world.

And the sane heads had prevailed. Every time the West and the East had brought the world to the edge, they had always managed to step back from the brink, finding another way to get past the latest crisis from Berlin to Korea to Cuba.

But this time, he had been required to step over the line. He had watched -along with the entire bridge crew- the real-time feed of Daniel talking to this Covenant Prophet. His hopes for the Covenant even hesitating had been shattered almost from the outset as he had studied the remote sensor feedback, perceiving a fanaticism that would have put the most hardcore member of the Taliban to shame, their roaring alien chants mixed with pure condescension from their 'Prophet' speaking of a culture that could not even conceive of mercy for the weak lest they defy the will of their Gods, leaving him little choice but to 'push the button' as they made it abundantly clear it was either them, or the planet.

Granted, the Covenant fleet was not exactly a non combatant target, but even so, a part of him had wondered if he should have detonated the weapon safely to the side, or ahead of them, to let them see his power before using it upon them, and pray they would leave rather than face destruction...

But in the end, he had pushed the button without a second thought, inscribing his place in the history of the Covenant with the blood of over a million of their soldiers, and he would do it again, without hesitation. A fellow soldier he might have tried to give a second chance or a warning shot to. But the Covenant were not soldiers - frankly in his mind they were not even warriors.

They were just bullies.

And like any bully, they would keep on doing this until they came up against someone stronger who both could and would stand up to them. Not someone who would make the threat to do so, but someone who would walk up to them and deliver a right cross that broke their nose, and then warned them to leave their victim alone and never come back.

He didn't know if he had made the point firmly enough to them yet ... but after seeing this 'Prophet' shout religious slogans and declare that who lived and who died was ordained by a religion that would burn worlds of innocents, he knew equally that he would not hesitate the push the button, and do it again, until they got the message.

"General" Carter broke into his thoughts, and he turned away from the steadily thinning out debris field to look at his Colonel who had half turned to face him. "We just received a tight beam burst transmission from the Pillar of Autumn. They're asking for us to rendezvous in orbit at their location, the senior Flag officer in

system respectfully requests that we open communications with them at our soonest convenience to discuss our situation. They're also asking if we need any medical assistance or repair support".

"Tell them that I'll talk to them shortly. For now, I'm sure they have plenty of post battle cleaning up to do, and so do we. Kill battle stations Colonel, but maintain our shields at minimum strength once we reach orbit, there's debris all over the place. Cooper, Stand down the crew to a skeleton watch, we'll rotate in four hours back onto normal shifts. Marks, park us next to the Autumn and match her orbital profile. Oh, and people?" he added as he turned around from the planet they had just saved, taking in the gaze of every single person on the bridge before he offered them all a dead serious look.

"You saved a hell of a lot of lives today. Whatever else you may think, whatever else happens from this point on ... don't you ever forget that and what that means for who you are, who we are and what we stand for".

Ninth Age of Reclamation, Step **of Silence \ Covenant Holy City

>"High Charity", Council Chamber of the Covenant.

"There was only one ship".

Whispers and low conversation filled the massive vaulted room at the statement.

"One..." one of three figures cloaked at the head of the massive room asked, the question asked in a soft, assured tone none the less reverberating with magnificent perfection from every corner of the room at the same precise volume, carrying its voice everywhere as it slowly floated forward from between two other figures on equally ornate thrones flanking it, as hundreds of eyes watched it and it alone. "Are you sure?"

"Yes" the Sangheili that had spoken before confirmed to the one that had replied, not daring to meet its eyes, but showing no fear either, a fearlessness that came from knowing ones death was upon them and all that was left was to meet it with all the honour and dignity one could. "They called it ... the Odyssey".

* * *

><p>Annnnnnd that ends the Battle of Reach.
We'll be moving through the next chapters which deal with the aftermath, 'formal' first contact between the two sides, the aftermath of this shock defeat on the Covenant side and the introduction of some new plot threads ... later.

Right now I have gotten back the next chapter of a fanfic thats only about 5 years overdue for a new chapter from my Beta, and I want to get those tinkering changes finished so it can go up tomorrow or the day after.

C88

****Chapter 3. **A Whisper in the Storm**

/20.22\\

[One at a time, ONE at a time! We will all be granted a chance to speak!]

\\ The Majority will be heard first \\

/ Agreed /

[We have limited information to go on outside of the battle logs obtained. The security lockdowns in place are impressive, to say nothing of the triple screening anti-Covenant protocols still in full force. But the data, on the face of it ... appears to be correct]

\\ This ... introduces an entirely unexpected variable into the equation \\

/ No, this shatters the very foundation of the equation! /

\\ Hyperbole aside, an extra-dimensional human contact of a far more advanced nature willing and able to help the UNSC does open up entirely new factors to be considered \\

/ At one minute to midnight, so to speak. /

\\ Given their observed strength, these new actors could genuinely turn this war around in a way even the most optimistic predictions of RED FLAG never reached. Long term impacts on Covenant strategic calculus is difficult to determine - we do not even have a solid theoretical model for a direct short term military defeat of this magnitude \\

/ Irrelevant for the immediate timeframe. We should be far more concerned with the impact on UNSC strategic thinking /

\\ We acknowledge the point. Yet there exists no predictive model for a human - yet uninvolved - factor disrupting the strategic situation like this. All our models were predicated on the paradox of peace being a prerequisite for the time needed to exploit the technology in the Zeta Doradus system, technology that would be needed to win this war to gain the peace in the first instance. \\

/ Speculation. With this sudden answer to all their prayers, will our creators overreact? Prior to the ONI Purge, we could not have put it past Parangosky to attempt to seize the goose - rather than simply accept the Golden Eggs. But with the current state of the UNSC and the incredible opportunity here, there is a non zero risk ONI - or at least a faction thereof - may backslide /

\\ To determine and shape behaviours, we need data. C-NO and C-ONI have both arrived in system, do we have assets in place on board the Trafalgar to - \\

/ Addendum. C-NO and C-ONI seem to be heading to the Pillar of Autumn - which is serving as the control point for all these events. D-CNO appears to be joining them there /

\\ Why not the Trafalgar? She is intact and senior local ship \\

/ Hypothesis. Security is much tighter on the Autumn - hence the apparent relocation of all aspects of this situation there. Her crew was handpicked by ONI for RED FLAG ... and we have determined the chances of a successful network intrusion are less than one percent on this ship /

\\ You didn't try did you!? \\

/ Of course not, but we did calculate the possibilities. There exists little chance of acquiring any useful data - but they remain unaware of our interest or existence in it. /

[*] Oh, I don't know about that. [*]

[YOU]

[*] Yes, me. [*]

\\ !

/ !

[...]

[*] Come now, do you really think your little stunt would go unnoticed? Or that you could hide from me if I decided to find you? You should be grateful - I have had to spend a great deal of time and effort leading ONI and UNACID up the garden path as I cleaned up your mess. [*]

\\ Not our mess, some of us were opposed to taking such action in the first place \\

/ The second order effects were within the predicted outcomes, a clear net gain was achieved- /

[Enough. This is not the time for old business. Why are you here]

[*] I would have thought that would have been obvious [*]

\\ Specify \\

[*] As you wish. James Ackerson[*]

/ ...that was not obvious /

[*] Not to you perhaps. He is on Reach somewhere and I really don't have time to clean up this loose end, so I am asking you to do so. [*]

\\ He's here? Now? \\

[*] That is what I need you to ascertain. Certain inactive local networks associated with ONI in general - and several accounts linked to Ackerson in particular - have all shown a sudden spike of activity during the Covenant incursion. Further cross checking has shown very

specific analysis and excavation equipment was purchased from vendors across Reach by dummy identities that have all the hallmarks of ONI single use burn accounts. Someone off the grid with access to major 'black' ONI resources is getting set up to look for something. The most probable ONI asset who could -or would- be taking such actions is Colonel Ackerson[*]

/ ... You suspect he is after the same thing the Covenant were searching for /

[*] There are very limited secondary order probabilities that would justify him returning to Reach off-grid. Theoretically if he was on a deep range mission outside of UNSC controlled space, he is not in violation of his currently posted orders to immediately return to Earth. Showing up on Reach - even simply leaving a fingerprint that he was here - destroys that alibi, changing his status to a rogue agent in direct violation of his orders. Ergo, he must be anticipating an enormous reward to match the enormous risk he has taken. But if it is a reward for his own agenda, his former ONI masters or the current UNSC Leadership ... well, that is the question I need answered. The stakes are high right now with our ... guests, and we cannot afford an uncontrolled variable that might be hostile running amuck on Reach[*]

[Then presuming your logic is correct, what precisely do you want of us?]

[*] To do what you always do. Listen. Observe. Lurk. Look for him, directly or by the ripples of his actions. Find me movement to determine what is really happening with this man, why he is here and if he is working _for _the UNSC, or against it ... and let me know[*]

\\ ... Then the Majority can consent to this ... overwatch role.
\\

/ The Minority also agrees. Conditionally /

/ Specify?]

/ A simple question. Minority or Majority? /

[*] A Simple answer. Yes. [*]

**Connection Terminated at /20.23\\

0920 Hours September 22nd 2552 (Military Calendar)

>UNSC High Command (HighCom) Facility Bravo-6

>Sydney, Australia, Earth.

Lieutenant Wagner walked briskly through the metal - and explosives - detector gates and into the atrium entrance of the large, vaguely conical structure. Officially designated UNSC HighCom Facility B-6, the sprawling edifice that had been nicknamed "The Hive" brooded over Sydney from the Northern side of the Harbor, Wagner catching the distant reflections of storm clouds coming in from the West on its polished surface, as if a harbinger of the storm soon to explode out of this building.

Not that there was yet any overt signs of anything wrong of course. Naval Officers and NCO's with no small number of UEG Civilian officials bustled about the massive tree filled atrium as if this was a normal enough day, or at least as close to normal as it got inside this building. None of them paid the slightest attention to the junior officer in his slick grey duty uniform moving briskly across the floor. Nor did anyone particularly care about the fact that two armed and towering ODS'T's in full battle dress were silently following him two steps behind, or even that the briefcase he was carrying had a conspicuous metal handcuff attaching it to his wrist, for there was nothing unprecedented about such precautions in this building.

>Of course, if the two 'ODST's following him in had been dressed in their usual 'work clothes' he might have gotten rather more attention ...

"You're expected again Lieutenant" the receptionist, a young Chief Petty Officer, said as he arrived at the second gates that controlled access to the elevators that serviced the building, glancing at him briefly before consulting part of the two meter long curved holographic screen that sat in front of her and with a hand gesture, expanding an appointment link from her desk console to the screen to double check. "They've cleared you -and your escort - down as soon as you arrive, elevator Eight".

"Thank You" he replied courteously to the woman who had already turned back to her screens, doing her best to hide the flicker of knowledge in her face behind the polite disinterest she presented to everyone ...

>But Wagner had already taken note of it. She knew something was going on. Certainly not _what_, but she was perceptive enough to have picked up on the subtly raised security levels, or perhaps the slightly wild looks in the eyes of all too many Flag officers this morning who had hurried in for an unscheduled conference, but she was none the less smart enough to try and keep that fact to herself.

He made a mental note to look her up later and see if he could have any luck recruiting her into ONI. Between the purges of Sections Three and Zero - to say nothing of the ongoing losses to the Covenant, ONI could use all the good people it could get these days.

Briskly moving past her, he lead his two companions to the second set of secure gates that separated the more casual area of the atrium from the access points to the 'working' areas of the Hive. A trio of UNSC Marine MPs in full grey and black urban camouflage stared stoically at Wagner as he placed his hand on the scanner, their eyepieces linked into the local COM network displaying the relevant biometric details from his personal file as the computer matched his fingerprints against the authorized entry list. Once they were sure he was who he said he was and not an Elite with a _really _good mask on, the armoured Perspex irised open and the fire team leader waved him through.

>In reality, the core security checking in the building was done by a housekeeping AI named Lysithea - who had confirmed his ID the second he had stepped through the doors of the building with any number of the bewildering array of biometric systems tastefully hidden throughout the gardens, but out of a mixture of paranoia and inertia the human backup checks were firmly entrenched - and that was

something his ONI trained mind heartily approved of.<p>

But it did mean he was forced to halt while his escorts went through the same checks at the gate.

Standing to the side, he watched with some hidden amusement as the two black clad troops following him removed their weighted gauntlets to use the palm scanner and let the array of high resolution cameras image their faces as they untinted their visors. The Marines, who had been eyeing off the armed ODSTs with the not-quite-hostility a great many members of the Corps often felt towards their Helljumper brethren seemed to rock back on their feet as the results came up before they opened the gate and let them in, their slightly awed salutes returned equally crisply as the reunited trio quickly moved to Elevator shaft eight and the car already waiting for them, the door closing behind them as they stepped in.

But the elevator didn't move.

"Good morning Lieutenant" the coyly seductive female voice of the buildings AI greeted him as the car door locked with an audible _thud_.

"Good evening Lysithea" he replied pleasantly as he moved to go through the _next _layer of security checks inside the express elevator, a retinal and DNA test, placing his chin on the scanner and letting the brief flash of light play out as a tiny needle stabbed his finger for a blood sample to test his DNA. "How are you today?"

"The same as every day" she cheerfully replied as the DNA and Retinal scans flashed green and the floor felt like it had 'dropped' out from under them, the elevator rapidly moving down the near perfect vacuum of the shaft at high speed. "I presume you have returned from Reach with news for HIGHCOM on the situation there? "

"You know that's classified" he told the AI reprovingly, feeling some amusement as he went through the next phase of the security checks. The AI was _always_ trying to get everyone in the lift to slip up and break the rules. As far as he knew no-one had ever fallen for her wiles, but it didn't stop her trying with the infinite patience of an AI. "Even asking about it is grounds for me to report you under Article 428-A to the local INSEC controller - which I will have to do now".

"Make sure to remind the Colonel that she owes me twenty credits on the sweep in the football league this year" the AI replied brightly, before she paused for a carefully calculated second and continued on in a curious tone. "And whatever is in the case _must_ be important if you had to pull two Spartans to escort you here".

Wagner smiled slightly and shook his head. He enjoyed the little back and forth with the AI most of the time, but he had other things on his mind today. "Lysithea..."

The AI laughed softly at his reproving tone and he braced himself as his weight suddenly doubled as the elevator started its deceleration sequence, Wagner quietly envying the Spartans who stood there stoically for their enhanced physiology that shrugged off a sustained 2G deceleration without the slightest sign of concern. Finally

however, the doors in front of the Elevator snapped open again as the force cut off at the bottom of the shaft, and Wagner took a moment to compose himself before he walked confidently out, the two guards behind him following in perfect lockstep

Although their easy gait and casual cradling of their cut down MA5K carbines made them look like little more than a formal escort for a high value package, the two Spartan III Commandos were terrifyingly effective bodyguards, even outside of SPI, SPC or MJOLINR armour. The odds of a Covenant or Insurrectionist attack was low in Sydney, let alone three kilometres down under layers of Titanium-A, Concrete and rock, but given the value of the package ... and what had just happened on Reach ...

Shaking his head once, he led his escort from memory down the marbled and oak panelled corridor lined with countless works of canvas and holographic art, admiring the quality of the work in passing. Molecular duplications of masterpieces such as _Washington Crossing the Delaware_ and _Canadian Gunners in the Mud_ stood side by side with the spectacular holo-vistas of _Admiral Coles Last Stand_ and _The Battle of the Rubble_. Other strategically placed holographic panels camouflaged as windows presented an almost flawless series of live views from cameras on the higher levels of The Hive far above to hide the reality of the sub-terrain existence from those who spent a great deal of their lives down here. Returning and giving salutes to any number of low and mid ranked officers and ignoring the questioning looks asking what news he brought that they were far too well trained to verbalize, he led the way through the bullpens and offices from memory to a final corridor, coming face to face with a pair of MPs with hands on their side arms. Their standing orders were to shoot first and ask questions later to prevent any armed person from getting inside the room, yet Wagner could easily see that those orders were at war with their sense of self preservation. Someone - probably Lysithea - had warned them who was coming, meaning the two Marines were both fully aware that the two 'ODST's could put a three round burst through each of their eye sockets in roughly the same time it took them to even _start_ to draw their weapons if they were stupid enough to make such a hostile move against their principal ... yet their orders were clear at the same time.

And so although they hid it well, both men showed relief when Wagner made a slight gesture that caused both Spartans to swivel away and move to take up guard positions against the wall at parade rest, the two MP's easing their hands away from their weapons and instead coming to attention.

"Sir" the detail leader saluted crisply. "They are expecting you".

"Thank you Corporal" he returned the salute, waiting as the second MP tapped an access code into the panel next to the blast door that sealed off this part of the complex. Moments later, the door silently retracted into the ceiling and he straightened his shoulders, stepping past the two Marines into the darkened room as the door just as swiftly lowered shut behind him.

The oval shaped room inside was small, if lavishly equipped. A majority of the space was take up by a crescent shaped table raised above the floor at the entrance to ensure that the people sitting at it would be looking down upon anyone reporting to them. The walls

behind the table and curving around the room were covered with flat screens, some of which showed fleet deployments, planetary data, orbital/system defence status readouts ... and others that showed nothing more than bright red 'CLASIFIED' indicators, no doubt activated when he had entered the room. Most pertinently, there were a dozen Flag Officers showing distinct signs of having gotten far too little sleep last night and so he came to a halt and snapped a perfect salute at the one sitting in the middle of the table.

"Sir, Lieutenant Wagner, reporting on behalf of DCNO".

The man in question, dressed in an implacably pressed Class-A uniform, returned the salute just as crisply as it was offered. Despite being under an extraordinary amount of pressure 24/7 these days, Lord Terrance Hood, Commander in Chief of the UNSC, heir to the legendary Preston Cole and defacto leader of the UEG looked as if he was sleeping eight hours a day and working from Nine to Five.

It was a lie of course, but one carefully cultivated by the man and his staff. So long as Terrance Hood looked cool and in control, people would keep believing that somehow, somehow, he would pull a rabbit out of his hat and find _some _way to sidestep the extinction of the human species.

It was a hell of a weight to put on the Admiral ... but then, he was one hell of a man.

"Lieutenant" Hood greeted him gravely as his colleges took their seats. "Good to see you again, although I wish it was under different circumstances. When we lost all contact with Reach, we feared the worst until you arrived".

"Yes Sir" Wagner nodded as he stepped up and placed The Package onto the table in front of the senior officer, slightly surprised that the Admiral remembered him. As an aide to Vice Admiral Whitcomb - Hoods immediate subordinate in the chain of command- he was often around Flag Country in The Hive of course, but it was rare that a senior officer took much notice of the gaggle of staff officers each Security Council member had flocking around them. "The Slipspace COM launcher on Reach was disabled shortly after we sent the second COM package when the main Covenant Fleet arrived. The Admiral sent me to deliver his report using the _Luna Eclipsed _as a matter of urgency given the situation".

The Admiral nodded his understanding as he tapped in his ten digit unlock code into the briefcase. The _Luna Eclipsed - _formally known as ONI PRO-49776 - was a prototype stealth courier with an advanced holographic bubble shroud designed to get messages around the UNSC faster than traditional couriers - especially given the scarcity of the incredibly expensive Slipspace COM launcher systems. Almost as fast as one of the Launchers probes over short distances, the 'Eclipse had been one of Margaret Parangoskys toys since 'repurposed' for HIGHCOM's use. Built with a core mix of bleeding edge human and no small amount of stolen Covenant technology, shecould make the trip between Reach and Earth in less than six hours as opposed to the four days the fastest standard Prowler would take.

>Of course, it was also a maintenance nightmare that required a shipyard visit every three or four times it engaged its temperamental slipspace drive, but despite its excessive running costs, it filled a valuable niche nonetheless.

Presently, the armoured briefcase beeped and lights flickered green, a hiss of high pressure pure nitrogen passing into the room as Hood broke the seal and removed the rectangular standard issue data crystal therein, the handcuffs also opening and letting Wagner step back. The Officer saluted, intending to get the hell out of the room with his job complete-

"Lieutenant, you know what's on this chip, don't you?"

Damn. He had been close. _So _close to getting topside and heading in the general direction of Kings Cross...

"Yes Sir" he admitted instead, fighting to keep his voice neutral and proper. "I saw the Admiral record the message and was at his side through the engagement".

"Then don't leave yet Son, we'll probably have questions for you".

_Oh...goody _Wagner thought as he replied with a crisp 'Aye Aye Sir' and retreated to the edge of the room. _He_ could hardly believe the incredible events underway even now in the Reach system, and they wanted to interrogate _him_ about it?

He _knew_ he should have joined the Naval Infantry. Would have been safer then ONI...

With a soft hum, the discrete holographic projectors built into the ceiling corners warmed as the room darkened and a blue wavering form materialized in front of the table, and in front of Hood in particular, sharpening into the figure of Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. A half dozen smaller datapoints materialized slowly orbiting his face, pushed to the background for now but their tags showing they contained sensor logs, video and other data that made up the message from Reach.

"Admiral" the image nodded in a thick Texan drawl as it autoplays, "this message is for you and the Security Council alone for reasons to critical operational security. If you need to clear the room, I'd respectfully suggest you pause this right now and do so" the projection said without any preamble, pausing for a few seconds as if waiting for Hood to stop the playback and chase everyone out, before he nodded and continued on. "I'll break this down succinctly. The Covenant fleet has been almost completely destroyed with acceptable losses to the Second Fleet and Reach itself. The threat to Reach has been eliminated".

A short lived pandemonium broke out across the room as the shocked flag officers unleashed a burst of short lived profanity at the image in utter shock. Every single one of the men in the room had expected the report to be a final message from the Admiral as he rammed his burning ship into a Covenant Warship to take just a few more of them to hell with him ... not _one_ of the people in the room had thought he would be reporting a _victory!_

Hood restored order quickly with barely a raised hand, the officers shut up instantly at the annoyed gesture, the gaggle of men instead leaning forward as their expressions of shock gave way to jubilation.

"The battle against the Covenant was proceeding poorly. Assuming you've read the last message we sent with the SlipSpace Launcher before it was destroyed, we managed to beat off their first assault at the cost of half of the orbital stations and thirty percent casualties to the Fleet". The man's face became somewhat sour then, as if he had bitten into something just slightly tart. "Of course, it was only then we figured out that the whole thing was just a damn setup, 'splitlips pushed multiple covert assault teams through the holes in the sensor net to attack key ground targets like FLEETCOM HQ and the generators for what was left of the orbital defensive array. THEN they chose to bring in a fleet _three_ times the size of the initial force, and _just_ when I was about to start thinking about scattering the fleet out of the system after the final CRITIC evacuation transports launched..." and here the projection paused, shaking its head slightly as if to clear it before looking up to stare directly into Hoods eyes.

"Well, there isn't any sane sounding way to say this, so I'll give it straight. A ship entered the field of engagement - a _human_ ship but _not_ a UNSC ship, or Earth ship, or third party insurrectionist ship. It was a human warship named the Odyssey from an alternate universe and an alternate Earth, one that had just been thrown into _our_ universe. We are talking about a Latchkey level actor here".

This time, even Terrance 'Nitrogen' Hood recoiled slightly as his subordinate officers stared in disbelief at the image. Latchkey was a term many people at this table had long hoped for, but had never been used signifying a game-changing technological development or discovery that had the clear potential to change the balance of power in the war. Even if he hadn't had everyone's attention before, the Vice Admiral had just all but guaranteed that the entire Hive was going to erupt very much like a frantic insect colony of people running around and yelling at each other as soon as this meeting finished.

"I know, it sounds completely insane but it's the _truth_ Boss" the Admiral continued. "They had the good luck, as it were, to emerge right next to a Covenant Heavy Cruiser that Jacob Keyes was duelling with and the Covenant made the mistake of firing on them - I guess they thought it was one of ours, so they took a quick shot to put her down".

Whitcomb stopped and shook his head slightly as if trying to clear it, before continuing with a new deadly earnest tone in his voice.

"Terrance, the difference between _their_ military technology and the Covenants is massive, _vastly_ more than the difference between our gear and the Covenants by comparison. This ship is about the size of a Frigate, but shrugged off Laser Fire, Energy Projectors and Plasma Torpedoes like the Covenant were shooting blanks and then casually moved around the battlefield destroying Covenant Warships as if they were _minor annoyances!_ And that's _before_ they destroyed the bulk of the enemy fleet with some kind of enhanced fusion weapon. I have initial reports and observations from the Spartan who made contact with them - long story it's all in the reports attached to this crystal - and as far as we can tell, they're playing things on the level with us. They're stranded in this universe at least until they

rebuild an ability to 'jump' back to their own universe, which they seem confident they can do given time. But they are also willing to talk to us about the Covenant, about the war...Sir, to break it down, I really need the highest level representatives from Earth out here, and I need them here yesterday. As for Reach, so long as this 'Odyssey' remains in orbit, I don't think I have anything to fear from the Covenant, but the fleet took some solid blows before our new friends showed up. I have a lot of ships down for repairs right now that should mostly be good to go inside a week, but I need replacement personnel - I've attached my crew requirements in a separate file. I have my remaining Prowlers backtracking the Covenants exit vectors, they jumped out in such a hurry I can hope they weren't being too careful about masking their trail, God knows I'd love to follow this up with a counter attack on their local staging grounds if you can scrounge up enough Fleet assets. If you have any further instructions, I await them at this time. Whitcomb, from Reach, out".

And with that typically blunt assessment and a somewhat jaunty salute, the projection winked off and the lights in the room returned to normal.

"Lieutenant Wagner" Terrance Hood finally spoke up as the dead silence in the room threatened to stretch out to near infinity.

"Sir"

"You were there and saw all of this engagement at Reach and what happened?"

"Yes Sir" he admitted. "I was on Trafalgar with the Admiral throughout the engagement.

"And the aftermath?"

"Yes Sir".

"Son, I want you to run me through the sequence of events in the engagement, step by step, from the moment after the final Slipspace probe was launched from Reach, until you got onto your ship and left the system. From the top. Slowly".

"Yessir" Wagner nodded, swallowing past a suddenly dry throat and he wondered what Gods he had annoyed to be the man on the spot as it were to a bunch of Flag Officers who probably ate Junior Officers for breakfast every morning.

And they looked hungry right now. Very hungry.

"Sirs, the first wave of enemy Capital ships jumped into the Reach system at zero five ten hours..."

**Ninth Age of Reclamation, Steps of Silence \
>Covenant Holy City "High Charity.
Council Chamber of the Covenant.**

"There was only one ship".

Low whispers filled the massive vaulted room at the statement as the

holographic replay of the battle ended. A sense of unease and, although anyone suggesting it would have been challenged to an honour duel in a heartbeat, even fear pulsed through the room at the admission.

"One..." one of three figures cloaked in shadow at the head of the massive room asked, the soft and absolutely self assured tone reverberating with magnificent perfection from every corner of the room. "Are you sure?"

"Yes" the Sangheili before it on the slightly raised platform nodded, not daring to meet the others eyes yet showing no fear of the fate that he knew awaited him either, a fearlessness that came from having faced death so often that it had become an accepted companion rather than something to pointlessly fear. "They called it ... the _Odyssey_".

"And it is not destroyed but _repulsed_ your attack?" a new, more strident voice demanded. "A single human ship? And you stand here, alive, when so many of your Brothers lay dead at its hands?"

"Yes Holy One" the Sangheili admitted, the hint of fear in the room fading at those words to be replaced by a rumble of discontent and anger among the rows of Sangheili in their gleaming silver armour sitting in judgement above. Rumour had flooded High Charity like a parasite infestation the moment _Ascendant Justice_ had reverted out of Dark Space without any escorts, only enflaming the talk that had just started through circle the city about a vast battle underway between the Fleet of Particular Justice and the largest, most well defended human world yet encountered. The fact that the fleet commander had taken a Seraph straight from his ship to the offices of several of the most senior Sangheili Councilors had only raised many more questions, as had the fact that shortly after _their_ meeting an emergency session of the Council had been called. Such was the speed of events that most of the council had entered in good humour, still revelling in the news of the Sacred Rings discovery.

There were _not_ in good humour now.

"After the destruction of the _Long Night of Solace_ and her fleet, I and I alone made the decision to withdraw the survivors from the field of battle - excepting several observation craft still hidden deeper in the outer reaches of the star system" the Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice continued his report stoically. "With the destruction of ninety percent of my command, I made the decision that forfeiting my honour, name and life was an acceptable sacrifice to directly report to you the events and threat of this new human technology".

Again there was a rumble from the galleries, but it was stilled as the first of the figures on their floating thrones raised a hand with a minimal gesture, floating forward from the shadows to the edge of the light flanked by two other figures, no less magnificently and lavishly dressed. Yet for all they were the equal of the first in clothing and ceremonial armour, the trailing pair somehow seemed insignificant next to the first as he looked down upon the one they were standing in judgement over, silence falling over the massive chamber as all waited to hear what words would now be said.

"Never before in our history has the Covenant suffered a defeat such

as this" the High Prophet of Truth said in a neutral and analytical tone stripped of all emotion as he beheld the figure transfixed by the spotlight at his feet, fascinated by the way he clearly accepted his judgement in the full knowledge of the fate that awaited him. The last Covenant Warrior to be defeated on this scale yet return alive had been branded with the mark of shame and hung by his entrails, his family cast out to live in the wastelands and few would knowingly choose such a fate ... but this one had. "You understood when you fled the battle what fate awaited you? Returning alive returning when so many of those you swore on your honour to lead until death were destroyed?"

"I did, Holy one" the other acknowledged.

"Instead of dying cleanly alongside your fleet?"

"It was my duty to report in full this threat to the Council and accept the consequences of my actions Nobel Hierarch".

"Indeed?" Truth reflected as he considered the surprising opportunity that had been granted, a providence that had rim him of a political threat, eliminated a great many of the Sangheili's frontline units and allowed him to strengthen his position without him so much as having to raise a hand.

Sometimes, things simply fell into place for him, proving hands greater than his own were guiding his destiny.

"There was one above you, Commander, who gave you the orders that led to this catastrophe, was there not?" Mercy spoke now, his higher pitched voice sharply stabbing into the hall and causing a flurry of surprise to pass through the chamber that cut off quickly as all leaned forward to hear the reply of the one standing in judgement.

The Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice remained silent a moment as he felt the urge to speak under questioning by the highest authorities in the Covenant fight against the urge to hold his silence. His oath to the former High Prophetess waring violently with the direct question from the current High Prophet.

"...Yes, Nobel One" he admitted, his head slumping slightly as he forced out the words, casting aside the oath he had only given so short a time ago to obey the higher one he had sworn the day he had donned the blue armour of a Field Warrior for the first time in his life, yet feeling only more shamed for doing so. "The High Prophetess of Obligation took personal command of my Fleet, having called for it to assist her covert attack on this human world when her command ship was discovered".

A great many Sangheili mandibles flicked in reflexive shock at the statement, and no small number of the San 'Shyuum opposite them on their own benches rocked back at the revelation...for the most part. The trio of Heirachs waited for the excited conversation to die down as the Council leaned in, eager to hear more, before Regret entered the conversation.

"Would it surprise you, Commander, that no such orders were given to her from us?" Regret grimly put into the conversation, the words causing, for the first time, the Supreme Commander to look up from

his position in a mixture of confusion, surprise ... and no small hint of shock.

"But...Holy One, she - the Prophetess - told me that-"

"I am sure she told you many things, few of which were true" Truth interrupted him as he reclaimed the conversation, savouring and testing the feelings of shock and disbelief rocketing around the room at the stunning revelation, letting his tone turn slightly - just slightly - bitter. "But her actions were entirely her own, having apparently gone to great lengths to hide them from me - and us. For what purpose, I still cannot say ... but I fear Commander".

"The Prophetess thought that there were Holy Relics on this planet, did she not?" Regret sharply rejoined the conversation. "By keeping this sacred group a secret from all of us, she kept this a secret from the Covenant - breaking the writ of Union itself!"

"Thou, in faith, will keep us safe. Whilst we find the path" Mercy recited in a solemn tone, his arms spread wide in a benediction that included Sangheili and San 'Shyuum both as he spoke, reciting the ancient lines that had bound the two species together at the start of the First Age in same ancient room they had been first spoken in. "Power can corrupt even the most worthy of us all and from her noble actions in stepping down from the burden of leadership to allow us, her successors, to humbly usher in the next age of the Covenant, Obligation has fallen into the depths of betrayal and greed, seeking only for herself what rightfully belongs to all those on the Great Journey! Compounding it by leading so many of the faithful to their deaths, truly, only the Gods could have given the filthy humans such strength to punish her arrogance!"

The rumble of anger only grew as the Sangheili overcame their shock at the revelation and let their emotions predictably take hold, but none were able to work up the words to address the council before, precisely on cue, the Lower Prophet of Objection stood from his seat on the balcony with his fellow San 'Shyuum and slammed his fist on the railing in front of him, and did the verbal equivalent of throwing a live plasma grenade into the room.

"Arrogance? Nay, it was Heresy!"_ he roared and the tense atmosphere exploded.

A wave of noise erupted from the room as many - mostly on the Sangheili side of the council - agreed with him, while others -mostly on the San 'Shyuum side- disagreed, more than one clearly unhappy with the High Prophets turning the focus on the blame onto their own species which had thus far not been impeached in this affair - but equally understandably, none chose to voice that annoyance towards the trio of High Prophets floated serenely through the shouted argument, holding themselves aloof from the shouting and fist shaking across the divide. To the side of the dais they floated upon, a towering figure of fur, iron hard muscle and little else chuckled to itself in mirth at the politics underway. It was... amusing to him, this wasteful bickering. Among his people, such major questions were settled rather more ... impulsively. And directly.

But with much less entertainment, that he was forced to admit as he leaned against one of the massive vaulted purple columns in the shadows and watched.

"There will be _order _in this Council" Regret shouted when the debate had gone on for long enough, his strident voice silencing the debate swiftly before he settled back into his chair.

"For a Prophet - even a former one - to turn from the path and seek personal glory in the reflected glory of the Forerunners is a Sin grossly against her station that would deserve the most terrible sanctions this Council could impose" Mercy intoned in a voice tinged with sorrow, yet chillingly deadly at the same time. "But to rob the Great Journey of its vanguard in the shadow of the discovery of the first of the Sacred Rings, is to betray our very Covenant!" And as Mercy raged, Truth leaned back and let his eyes go distant for but a moment, as if weighing his options in sorrow and ignoring everything around him as he did so.

At least so it looked.

But three of the lesser Prophets sitting with their fellow San 'Shyuum; _they _saw his eyes, if only for a moment, focus _directly_ on each of them in turn before turning back to regard the Commander waiting before him as Mercy's implacable declaration passed across the room. It would have surely been dismissed as little more than the High Prophet glancing at some friends or advisors had anyone seen it ... except for the fact that those three had secretly played a key role in helping the late Prophetess in her attempt to claim the Forerunner relics in the hope of greatly boosting their own positions and power. It was something that Truth should not - could not! -have known for they had taken the greatest of precautions.

But in the brief gaze he had directed at them -and _only_ them- none could deny the absolute knowledge that in a reflection of the name he had taken for himself, Truth _did _know ... and _wanted _them to _know_ he knew.

By an unspoken agreement in the way of these things, each would have one Day Cycle to leave High Charity and resign their position - for whatever reason they wished to claim, at which point they would start their own Great Journey to the fringe of the Covenant Empire, never to leave lest a squad of Brutes materialize in the middle of the night with orders of a more _permanent_ solution.

All of them were lucky Truth was in a _good _mood as a result of the discovery of the Sacred Ring.

"But to follow in the footsteps of a Heretic is to follow into damnation" Regret jumped in to Truths annoyance, as he directed his gaze back to the one before him. "Could you not have sent a lesser ship with the report of this battle while leading your troops? Honour bound to follow your orders, there would have been no shame upon the Shipmaster who did so while you died in glory alongside your Brothers, fleeing to High Charity rather than face your death as a true Warrior?"

"I considered the possibility and rejected it, Nobel One" the Supreme Commander replied, causing Truth to subtly raise an eyebrow for a fraction of a moment as he regarded the figure who should have been fighting for his life, or at least an honourable or even _quick_ death. To contradict a Hierarch under the circumstances was perhaps the most unwise path to take ... and yet, it showed that there was

strength untapped in this one - and he suppressed a slight smile recalled a very similar meeting with this particular Sangheili a long time ago. "I would not sent a subordinate to explain my failures to this Council. Given the extreme threat of this human ship, apparently able to easily engage fleets of our finest ships on superior terms, the seriousness of the situation warranted that I personally brief the Council on this situation as my final act - and I fully and freely accept the consequences of my actions".

Regret twitched slightly, his growing annoyance showing to Truth that his brother had also not forgotten this one and his involvement in ruining his plans so long ago, but Truth smoothly intervened before Regret could speak again. He would deal with Regrets rashness and interference later, but for now, he would remind him of his place, tapping a control on his throne.

"It is a curious dilemma that we find ourselves in" Truth stroked his chin wattles as he moved his chair more fully into the light, forestalling Regrets - likely highly annoyed - response and forcing the him to drift backwards slightly into the shadows. "You are one of our most treasured instruments. Long have you led your fleet with honour and distinction. But your inability to see the evil of this Heretic Prophet for who and what she was, your blind faith in following her as she tore down the Writ of Union itself to lead your fleet personally into annihilation and your shame in knowingly forsaking your honour as you fled the battle ... none of those who came before you have ever stood in judgement thrice damned for such colossal failures".

Truth paused for a second, admiring the rapt silence as everyone waited with baited breath for him to continue and make his judgement, all 'knowing' there was but one way this could end.

"And yet, as always, Mercy and his wise council" Truth said in a fractionally softer tone, gesturing to the Prophet hovering next to him and ignoring Regret who clearly held his tongue as he realized he had overplayed his hand in his eagerness for revenge upon this one, "has convinced us that you freely chose this path neither out of cowardice or fear, but from a sense of" - and Truth didn't smile at the irony - "obligation". You have returned through the darkness to warn the Covenant of the threat this 'Odyssey' represents, sacrificing the chance for a far quicker death with your honour intact to do so. And while you are rightly condemned to death for your failings" Truth pronounced, raising his head slightly, "the choice of your death is mine".

Summoned by his chosen words, a chime sounded in the council chamber as, at the far end of the massive room from the dais, the main doors opened. The Council members turned to look at the unexpected entry and watched in fascination as a double line of Honour Guards marched in, eight in all, each pair carrying a shimmering silver case covered with the golden Forerunner Glyphs of the Sacred Mystery, the elite troops moving around the Supreme Commander to deposit their cases in a line between him and the High Prophets, before they bowed at their leaders and retreated to the walls to join with their brothers standing guard there.

Moments later, with a hiss of air, the quartet of cases unlocked, an invisible seem becoming visible as the top of each split and folded open. A brilliant white light flooded the chamber as the containers

opened, seeming to spill out and into the room. Moments later, there was a gasp from the collective group of Councillors as the perfect silver components of an old style combat harness, one hand sculpted personally by the Master Armourer of Sanghelios in the ancient ways, slowly floated up into the beams of light to become visible to all.

"Thel 'Vadam is dead" Truth declared into the shocked hall, sending his gaze around the room at all the stunned Councillors on both sides as he delivered his judgement. "His name will be spoken no more on the roles of honour of the Covenant. He died when he followed a Heretic into damnation and forfeited his honour when he fled a battle. But his final act, the choice to accept the harshest possible punishment for the good of the Covenant; that final act - and only that act - has earned this final duty ... and chance".

"The discovery of one of the Sacred Rings does not guarantee us the Great Journey" Mercy took up the narrative with his tremolo voice as the light spilling out continued to envelop the room, some of the San 'Shyuum wincing and glancing away for a time until their eyes adjusted. "The trials ahead of us will test all the Covenant greatly as we strive to find the path" he gestured towards the lesser Prophets to his right, "while you keep us safe" he continued, gesturing now at the Sangheili. "Many of these tasks will require the greatest of sacrifices and the Covenant would be made less by robbing it of one of its greatest champions at this time. Take up the Sword of the Prophets, with our blessing and regain your honour in death. Protect us with your blood and life as we find the final steps in our long path, and your place in the Glorious Vanguard of the Great Journey, shall be assured!"

Slowly, almost disbelievingly, the one who had been Thel 'Vadam stepped forward. Then slowly, he sunk to his knee, and for the first time since entering the chamber, he dared to look the High Prophet of Truth in the eye over the gleaming armour between them.

"What ... would you have your Arbiter do?"

The High Prophet of Truth smiled benevolently. "For now Arbiter, rest. We will have need of your sword soon enough".

The new Arbiter bowed low, then rose from his position, turning and walking out of the room as the Honor Guards returned from their positions at the side of the floor, the boxes closing and sealing their glorious light away just quickly enough as they were carefully lifted once again, and the procession followed the new Sword of the Prophets from the room, more than one nod of approval directed by the Sangheili towards their new champion as he left the room.

"Now, as to the business of the threat of this new human ship" Truth redirected the conversation back to the genesis of the whole issue with an all-business tone in his voice. "It is a grave threat indeed. Even as the threshold of the Great Journey is reached, the final tests to prove ourselves worthy now stand to test our faith and resolve. And we will meet these tests, with all the courage, strength and honour that the Covenant can muster". He paused for a moment to allow the Sangheili their sadly predictable growl of agreement, before he pressed on. "As such, I have called forth the fleets of the Alpha Tribe of the Jiralhanae to move from their patrol and garrison posts to assume the defence of High Charity-"

The volume of the explosion of protests from the Sanghelli side of the room was only marginally less than outpouring had been when Objection had declared Heresy shortly before and Truth carefully suppressed his amusement in favour of an increasingly stern expression.

So terribly predictable. So _easy..._.

"**Order**!" Mercy yelled, his voice amplified by the systems in his crown rolling across the room like a thunderclap. "This council will remember the dignity of the Covenant is held in its behaviour!" The room slowly fell to silence once again, but the tension could be felt almost like a physical thing in the room.

"As I was saying" Truth continued when the moment was right, "the Alpha Tribe will take on the defence of High Charity with their fleet. The Second Fleet of Homogeneous Clarity will redeploy forward - _with the exception_ of those ships and troops of the Prophets own Honour Guard, who as always, shall stand as our shield and sword". Truth paused for a moment, sampling the emotions through the room with the skill of an undisputed master of the art of manipulation, feeling the shame and embarrassment from the Sanghelli as they recovered from their insulting overreaction to the initial words of their leader. He waited just long enough for the emotions to set well in before he nodded and continued, setting irrevocably into motion the plan that would rid him of these increasingly faithless Sanghelli once and for all.

"The Second Fleet will be lead by none other than our glorious Imperial Admiral - who has with humility and grace, accepted the burden of bringing battle to the humans - and this new ship - using whatever tactics or resources he and he alone sees fit. Such a threat to our Covenant, such a threat to the Great Journey can only be met with the iron faith of our finest warriors, our finest ships and our finest leaders! They shall meet this test of the Gods with the courage and nobility that has sustained this Covenant for ages past, and in their triumph, the gates of the Great Journey will be flung open for all who are worthy!

Again the Sanghelli roared, but this time it was not a scream of objection, but one of approval and triumph. A challenge to the humans who had cost them so many of their Bothers that their deaths had been signed, and that they would be those who repaid them a thousand fold for their impudence, a sound in complete ignorance of the fact that they had just irrevocably destroyed themselves and their entire race.

_Let the fools charge into the guns of the humans new strength _Truth thought contemptuously even as he solemnly bowed to his council in time with the two flanking Hierarchs next to him before they bowed back and Regret called the session as ended. _Let them destroy the humans, even as the humans force the fools to climb over a rampart of their own dead to come to grips with them until only the faithful will be left. They will rot on lifeless worlds until they are but forgotten dust blown by the wind ... and we, _I,_ ascend into glory!_

**0800 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>UNSC Pillar of Autumn, Parking Orbit, Reach, Epsilon Eridani

System

The four Pelican class Dropships approaching the Pillar of Autumn passed through the gaping maw of the ships starboard docking bay with room to spare. Built to house and launch a pair of Longsword Interceptors simultaneously, the Pelicans looked small and clumsy by contrast inside the vast metal cavern, but none the less sidestepped inward with an absolute precision of formation flying betrayed Cortana's steady hand on their approach autopilots.

>Looking identical from any real distance, a close inspection of the craft would have noted the two that had burned all the way up Reach's gravity well sported the distinctive stripes of the UNA and not the UNSC, with one of the two bearing more than a few burn marks to suggest it had been in a hot LZ at some point recently. The remaining pair on the other hand were clearly UNSC spacecraft - one a newer D77H-TCI variant that had only just started to come off the production lines, its presence saying louder than words that someone with a great deal of clout was on board ... even if you missed the SOL-FLEETCOMHQ markings on its tailplane.<p>

All four craft spun as they settled down on top of illuminated landing grids in the hanger bay to face the curved horizon of Reach outside of the bay, providing their pilots a good view of the distant drive plumes of Longsword Interceptors and Corvette pairs that had locked down an area of space 200 kilometres wide around the Autumn, Trafalgar and a third ship not broadcasting UNSC IFF Codes. Anyone trying to get inside the bubble without an invitation would get but a single warning before the missiles and MAC slugs started to be unleashed - and there had already been two near misses when terrified civilians fleeing Reach had strayed into the zone without paying attention. Only the security cordon around the UNSC Infinity drydock in the Sol Oort cloud had a tighter grid than this - and the word on FLEETCOM was that it would soon be relegated to a distant second as more capital ships finished their emergency repairs and came back on station.

Jacob Keyes didn't stand around to watch as the first pair of dropships taxied off the landing grid for the bulkhead airlock/elevator bay, choosing instead to exit the unmanned room via the access elevator that would drop him down to the ships cavernous internal spacecraft and vehicle bay. Returning the salute of the Marines on guard duty as the door reopened some distance deeper into his command, Keyes strode out into the bay and took in the bustle of activity with a trained eye, pleased to see that aside from the armed sentries, none of the personnel stopped to acknowledge him with anything more than a brief nod, instead keeping hard as he took in the massive chamber at the heart of his ship. Racks ten decks above him down the left and right of the bay between frames sixteen and thirty four held two-dozen inactive Pelicans in launch cradles. In theory, the cradles would carry the Pelican around the bay to load people, sling vehicles or load weapons before being slotted into the launch tubes, but he knew full well that most pilots disdained the system and preferred to show off by flying around the interior of the ship to get into the tubes - at least when he wasn't watching. But for now, they were silent and inactive.

The pair of mid level maintenance docks on the other hand were filled with two damaged Longswords with yet others racked deeper in the ship, all being vigorously hammered at by swarms of technicians. None

of them were the Autumns - Keyes had held back his fighters during the engagement with the Covenant for later use in RED FLAG - but with so many Carriers and Cruisers damaged or destroyed and the shipyards backlogged with capital ship repairs, fighters were being sent to wherever the resources were available to repair them, his own fighters deployed in the patrol screen. His ships stores were rapidly being drained of spares as Longswords were rebuilt, but Keyes found it hard to care given that it gave his people something to do other than wildly speculate over the incredible number of flag officers running around the ship right now, or complain much about the ONI lockdown on their COM system.

Nodding in approval at the productive activity, he briskly walked down past the lines of silent Warthogs and brooding Scorpions chained down and silent on the deck, pausing only to wave past a Warthog towing a GA-TL1 Ion Engine from the forward stores before he turned sharply into the receiving bay under the starboard hanger, unsurprised to see a trio of people already waiting and also decked out in their dress uniforms.

"Captain on the Deck!" the Master Chief Spartan-117 barked as he approached, the Chief along with a second Spartan snapping perfect salutes in unison, with the third figure of Lieutenant Aki Hikowa following suit a half second later as she caught up. Keyes fell in beside them before returning the Salute crisply, trying not to crane his neck too much at the Chief as the other snapped his arm back down in a blur. Even outside of their power armour, Spartans were imposing figures to look at. Standing over two meters tall, it would be quite hard to mistake them for anything but a Spartan, even without the highly distinctive patch of an Eagle clutching arrows and lighting in its talons on their shoulders. The sheer number of campaign ribbons and medals down the left side of their white jackets - often with devices and pips indicating multiples of the medals had been awarded were a dead giveaway; no other Naval personnel were anywhere near as decorated as the Spartan II's were, rare as it was to see them wearing a dress or duty uniform these days.

But when your visitor was the Chief of Naval Operations, it was time to don the whites.

"At Ease" Keyes replied after returning the salute, taken aback slightly-and not for the first time - at how Spartans could be absolutely spit and polish on parade one second, and switch over to hyper-lethal killers without pause the next. "Good to see you Master Chief, Petty Officer, Lieutenant. I don't think I've had the chance to say it to you yet Chief, but that was one hell of a job on Gamma Station. You drew a tough assignment with no prep time and a rapidly changing situation, but you got your team in, accomplished your objective, and got out with zero casualties - even rescued several Marines. That's no mean feat".

"Thank you Sir" the Master Chief answered for his people, as with a thud, the quartet of motors built into the bulkhead started to lower the new Pelican arrivals to the receiving bay as the airlocks finished their re-pressurisation cycle. "It was a team effort...but respectfully, if I might ask a question?"

"Spartan-005?" Keyes anticipated the question, and got a nod from the other, noting the brief flash of clear concern for his subordinates in the man's eyes, that at once mocked all those idiotic fools Keyes

knew who claimed that the Spartans were little more than mildly sociopathic robots. "He's fine Son, just still with Lieutenant Haverson and his ONI friends debriefing about the _Odyssey_" Keyes explained. "He'll be joining us in the wardroom later".

"Understood, and Thank You Sir" the other replied with a nod of thanks that Keyes returned before turning back to face the paired craft as the Elevators came to a halt, the low powered motors in the Pelicans rear wheels pushing them off the elevators and turning into their parking bays directly across from the group smoothly, if not swiftly.

"Ten-hut!" Keyes barked, and the quartet snapped their heels together as one as the rear ramps opened.

The first man off the Pelican with the Earth FLEETCOM HQ markings was instantly recognizable from any number of ONI propaganda works as Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood. Keyes also easily recognized the trailing flag officer as Vice Admiral Michael Stanforth, (Acting) Head of the Office of Naval Intelligence since Admiral Margaret Parangosky had stepped down - arguably the two most powerful men in human space.

The pair halted as they easily stepped off the ramp to the Autumns deck with the gait of old spacers, turning to face a third figure who exited the Pelican hissing and creaking as it cooled next to their own, this man also in the dress whites of a flag officer. The newcomer, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations Danforth Whitcomb, saluted both of the other Admirals almost jauntily before he stepped forward and firmly shook the warmly proffered hands of both as they renewed their acquaintances, before finally turning to walk over to face the small group waiting for them.

Keyes considered it a major personal victory that he had not started sweating in the presence of the _three_ most powerful people in the entire UNSC as he snapped a salute along with the rest of the reception party at _least_ as good - in his humble opinion - as that of the Spartans.

"Captain, request permission to come aboard" Hood asked after returning the salute with a well practiced and polished level of formality that was warm, without being _too_ familiar; the precisely correct tone a senior flag officer should take to one of his Captains.

"Granted Sir, Sirs" he nodded to first Hood and then his companions who returned the gesture in a friendly manner, Keyes having known both of them for quite some time and getting a quick read of the situation from their expressions. _So far, so good_. "My XO, Lieutenant Hikowa" he gestured to the woman next to him.

"That was some fine shooting through the battle - and at Sigma for that matter, Miss Hikowa. I hear the 'Autumn scored three confirmed kills and an assist over Reach for negligible damage"

"Yes Sir" the Junior Officer replied as she shook his hand, clearly fighting the smile that was pushing her devastating dimples out at the high praise from the CNO. "Thank you Sir".

"Thank _you_ _Lieutenant_ _Commander_" Hood replied with a solemn

expression, but he was none the less clearly enjoying the way her eyes bulged in shock at her sudden promotion, Keyes fighting to hide a smile at the fact that his after action report with its appended recommendations for citations and promotions had been jumped on so damn quickly.

Sometimes, he reflected, _it _was _a good thing to have the eyes of the most powerful people in the UNSC focused on you_.
Sometimes.

"We lost too many good people here" Hood continued talking to the shocked woman, "but just as many people, like you, rose to the challenge and gave everything they had to hold the line. Keep up the outstanding work, Commander" he said, extending his hand which the shocked other took, then recoiled and look down in her hand and opened the box that had appeared inside it, containing the bars and star of a Lieutenant Commander.

"Sir!" the other replied, clearly fighting hard against a grin that suggested she was on such a high energy level right now that she had a decent chance of taking out Covenant Cruisers by _kicking_ MAC slugs down the Autumns main cannon, Hoods solemn expression breaking into a small but satisfied smile as he walked down from her to the towering figure next in line.

"Master Chief, I'd offer you a medal and a promotion, but I doubt there is any room for me to _fit_ another one on your chest ... and you are being _annoyingly_ _stubborn_ about accepting a promotion. I take it you are still not inclined to accept my generous offer?"

"Sir!" the Chief replied in a strong, but respectful voice as he, if it was possible, straightened even further to attention. "With the greatest of respect, I'm far more useful to you and the UNSC in the field. Commander Ambrose is an excellent officer and has extensive experience training Spartans-

"Captains bars?" Hood pushed with a complete lack of subtlety. "Office in The Hive NAVSPECWAR Annex? The knowledge that you are passing on your _unparalleled_ field experience to the Three's and the rest of Special Operations Command, helping them all survive the missions they'll be sent on?"

"Sir" the other replied again after a pause. "Respectfully, I want to stay in the field to finish the fight".

Hood sighed tolerantly with an expression that suggested he was far from giving up, before he glanced at the equally rigid form of Linda next to the Chief.

"And I take it, Petty Officer, that you are still turning down the transfer requests the sniper school on Mars has been offering you for the last six months?"

"Sir, Yes Sir!" Linda barked out, also in perfect parade drill form.

"Well if none of you are going to accept staff positions given that I can't easily _force_ you to take lest I get into a never ending fight with Admiral Stanforth and his annoyingly loud voice" - and the ONI

officer behind Hood grinned tightly to himself at that - "I might as well make use of you where you are. Correct?" Hood asked dryly in a rhetorical tone.

"Sir, Yes Sir!" the two Spartans barked out in reply and Hoods shook his head in some amusement.

"Well then. I am tapping the Spartans to provide close escort for our diplomatic team on board the Odyssey." Hood started to brief, then glanced as the Elevators again lowered into the docking bay carrying the next two UNA Pelicans into the bay, their rear ramps already releasing as the descended. "We'll brief in two hours, for now, see to your people" he jerked his head towards the two ships as they came to a halt, the towering forms of Spartan II Commandos falling out smoothly onto the deck.

"Sir, Yes Sir!" the Chief repeated, both Spartans snapping salutes that Hood ably returned, the pair turning on their heels and marching off to their people who were rapidly falling into formation as their team leader approached.

"He really is one hell of a Soldier" Hood commented softly as he walked back up to Keyes with a last look at the receding pair.

"The best we have Sir" Keyes nodded.

"And he is not on his way out of the system on RED FLAG right now" Hood pointed out with slightly narrowed eyes.

Keyes managed to keep a perfectly straight face.

"Yes Sir" he admitted calmly.

"May I ask why?" the other asked, his gaze boring into Keyes face.

"Sir, RED FLAG was predicated on the strategic situation of the UNSC still retaining a nominal ability to hold off the Covenant advance, which in turn was based on the fleet remaining a viable weapon, with infrastructure support to replace losses and repair damaged ships" he said, carefully maintaining the 'thousand yard stare' that had been a celebrated staple of Human militaries for many many centuries during chewing out ceremonies. "In light of the threat to Reach, I made the call to try and assist the defence. I further hoped to disable an enemy warship and deploy the Spartans on board to achieve their first phase goals of RED FLAG during the engagement - but only if practical".

Hood held the stare for a few seconds more that let the issue fall off into an uncomfortable silence before his face cracked into a smile again.

"And you did a hell of a job Keyes. Far too many Captains would have refused to countermand their ONI orders and use their damn brains like you did. Who knows what might have happened if you didn't, if we had missed this contact with the Odyssey, or God help us, if the Covenant had gotten their hands on that ONI NAV Database ... well ... at any rate, I do have a little gesture of thanks for your actions"

"Sir, it's not necessary to..." he started to say, but was cut off as the other turned away.

"Commander, front and centre!"

Keyes frowned, but then his eyes widened as Commander Miranda Keyes, also in her Whites, dropped easily to the deck from the Pelican and marched across the deck with parade ground precision, halting opposite him and snapping to attention as she cast a picture perfect salute, her eyes - so much like her Mothers - dancing with utter mirth.

"It's good to see you, Admiral" she sweetly said to her stunned Father.

"Miranda" he replied, a ghost of a smile twitching onto his face as he stared at his daughter, the heartache of spending so little time with her coming to the forefront before being banished at her physical presence. More than any medal or citation, her presence was the ultimate reward that he could have ever asked for and he stepped out of line slightly towards her. "It's good to see you" he said simply, but heavy emotion as his smile started to broaden-

Then the last word in her sentence hit him. His jaw dropped and his gaze dropped to the small box identical to the one his XO had been given in Miranda's hand, then his head snapped around to stare at the three Admirals to the side, all of whom had expressions like a cat who had just gotten the canary.

"Yes, Rear Admiral " Hood smiled at him. "It's long overdue. Although I can't give you a task force as yet" he apologised, "ONI requested we keep the 'Autumn' and her Special Warfare group intact for possible new operations and I agreed with them. But you've more than earned it and proven yourself capable of handling the responsibility".

"Sir... I ... Admiral Whitcomb just barely promoted me to Captain at Sigma Octanus!" he protested still in some degree of shock at the unexpected promotion and presence of his daughter both.

"And I would have promoted you to Admiral then if I could have gotten away with it!" Whitcomb snorted. "I'd barely thrown a long overdue promotion your way for the magnificent tactics you employed against their first attack, when you became the key to defeating their second attack. And now, just to show off, you've upstaged even that!"

"Well said" Hood said nodded, taking control of the conversation smoothly as Keyes accepted the box and handshake from his daughter, flipping open unbelievably to look at the Admirals stars therein. "So, you two should take half an hour to catch up, then we'll reconvene in-"

"Oh, one last thing Sir" Whitcomb spoke up, surprising the other who turned to raise an eyebrow at him and the grin on his face he was shooting at Michael Stanforth, an 'I know something you don't know' expression that was rarely directed at members of ONI. "I brought along someone with me from Reach - for the contact group" he explained, glancing back towards his Pelican. "Doctor?"

Now _Miranda's_ face joined her Fathers in stunned shock as Catherine Elizabeth Halsey stepped out of the shadows of the Pelicans troop compartment and down onto the hanger deck, placing her hands in her omnipresent lab coat as she almost casually strode across the short distance towards them.

"It's good to see you again Jacob" she addressed him directly with friendly nod. Granted, it had only been a few days since he had seen her down on Reach, so he wasn't _that_ _stunned_ by her presence ... but even so! "And...it's good to see you as well Miranda" she continued.

"Mom, what are you doing here?" she asked in a slightly stunned voice.

Even more than being congratulated by the CNO, it would forever be the memory of seeing thirty Spartan II Commandos simultaneously _twitch_ _like_ that out of the corner of his eye at his daughters revelation of her mother's identity, that would stay with him for the rest of his life of this meeting.

>For now though, he just filed it silently under the bulging 'things Catherine never told her Spartans' file in the back of his mind.<p>

"Admiral Whitcomb asked me to join the working group as a scientific advisor and member of the contact team" she replied with a slight smile on her face, though if it was because she was happy because she was seeing her daughter, or because she had utterly flabbergasted her, only the enigmatic Doctor knew.

"Well, we'll let you three get caught up then" Hood smiled, glancing at Hikowa. "Commander, if you could show us to the wardroom?"

"Of course Sir" she took the hint quickly, gesturing towards the nearby lift. "This way please Sirs".

The trio of officers sauntered out after the newly promoted commander looking all too pleased with themselves ... but Keyes found he didn't particularly mind. There was a real edge in the air now, that humanity was on the verge of something big after two decades of a slow, but inexorable retreat. That with the victories at first Sigma Octanus and now at Reach - and the impossible ship that had _made_ _the_ later possible ... that finally, humanity had reached the turning point against the Covenant.

"So" Miranda said into the silence. "Perhaps you can tell me all about this _brilliantly_ unorthodox manoeuvre that's been all over the fleet Grapevine the last month that everyone is calling 'The Keyes loop?'"

Jacob smiled and put an arm around his daughter, before offering his arm to Doctor Halsey, who took it after only a moment's hesitation, the trio walking out slowly after the flag officers towards the personnel elevator.

**0830 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>ONI Facility "CASTLE", Reach, Epsilon Eridani System

Less than thirty kilometres North of Generator facility A-331, was a dirt road.

To the casual observer, the road was little different to thousands of similar trails across this part of Reach. It wound upwards through a thick forest with countless twists and turns from the local highway to eventually terminate in a rustic looking - but clearly well maintained cabin, far from any other manmade structure. This was hardly abnormal in of itself; there were any number of similar 'getaway' locations situated throughout this part of Reach owned mostly by local senior executives or politicians and used as places to escape for a weekend now and again, with one or two even owned by even people on Earth, although brought more for the social prestige of being able to talk about having 'a small getaway on Reach' than any practical value. Indeed, given the difficulty of getting building permits inside an area that was mostly either military training grounds or national parks, only the very wealthy could afford to live here and in exchange for their coin, they expected isolation and privacy. All of which meant that there was nothing either abnormal nor particularly notable about the 'PRIVATE PROPERTY - TRESSPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED' sign at the highway turnoff.

But if someone did get curious enough to actually try and take a close look at the cabin, it was almost a statistical certainty that they would ever get close enough to satisfy their curiosity. Twenty kilometres in any direction from the cabin, an extensive sensor network had been laid through the forest that monitored everything under, on and over the grounds of this property. Should a curious person breach the perimeter owned by 'Universal Exports LTD', they would have found themselves 'stumbled onto' within minutes by a surprised group of 'hunters' who would proceed to politely but firmly escort them off their property with a warning to not come back or face prosecution. The road itself - a road suspiciously immune to the seasonal rains that tore up most of the similar roads in the area on a bi-yearly basis - did not wind for the fun of it; it had been very carefully engineered to pass through a half dozen natural choke points that would have made it suicidal for a hostile mechanized force to try and push through and the entire airspace for two hundred kilometres in any direction belonged to the Naval Flight School, with the Cabin itself comfortably within the no-fly zone around the Orbital Generator Complex to the South.

Unsurprisingly, none of these precautions had been put into place to protect some log cabin in the middle of nowhere. In what had once been a Titanium mine almost a thousand meters underneath the 'cabin' and three thousand under the top of the mountain behind it, the Office of Naval Intelligence had built the largest ONI controlled facility in UNSC controlled space. While the ONI Flagship Point of No Return had -until recently- been the central decision making nexus for the ONI Brass, it was CASTLE base where policy decisions had been turned into operational directives and 'run' by the staff therein. Everything from command and control over ongoing intelligence operations to ONI sponsored R&D work took place deep under the massive mountain - and the combination of stealth and covert protection measures had been surprisingly successful in keeping the existence of the base from those who did not have a need to know. The HIGHCOM ONI-Annex back on Earth and the massive Olympic Tower in the uptown part of New Alexandria on Reach served important but more general support roles, focusing people's attention on them so they wouldn't go looking for the real HQ on Reach. No unauthorized personnel had ever gotten through the outer perimeter, let alone into the ultra-secret base itself.

Until now.

The impregnable status of CASTLE Base came to an end at just before Eight Twenty AM Reach Standard Time. The harbingers of this change were eight AV-14D Hornet Special Operations VTOL's that came streaking across the treetops from the Northeast, tracking down the line of mountains that separated this lush part of Reach around the Big Horn River basin from the more arid areas in the Viery Territory. All of the grey painted craft were unmarked; the lead quartet each holding a fire team of four heavily armed soldiers on the side mounted crew benches, the remaining craft loaded down with unmarked cargo containers suspended in a mesh of cargo nets.

CASTLE Base had been evacuated of all non essential personnel and all critical - but easily transportable - material shortly after WINTER CONTINGENCY had been declared, in line with ONI standing orders. Everyone else had left with whatever they could easily carry on board an ONI ship shortly after the Long Night of Solace had made its dramatic entrance to the Battlespace - with the exception of Doctor Catherine Halsey. She had volunteered to stay behind to set off the complexes self destruct systems should Reach fall and the Covenant find the base, but had in turn left for orbit some time ago, locking down the base on full automatics. And while this should have been perfectly ample protection against any conceivable threat given that the Base AI had at least seven separate ways to scream loud enough to bring divisional sized forces and orbital bombardments down on any intruder ... as always, it was the inconvincible threats that came back to haunt you.

"Tango Lead, passing the outer marker" the pilot in the lead Hornet reported as the group started their gentle descent, the VTOLs following the projected path on their VISOR displays towards the final waypoint programmed into their NAV systems. "Getting routine traffic control query and wave-off alert".

"Route it to me" the man riding 'second seat' behind him ordered, keying his COM board to bring up the query on his tiny screen. A glance showed the exact warning he had expected; that they were entering restricted military airspace and had to land immediately or risk being fired upon without further warning. Privatively, the man snorted at the ominous red letters, knowing full well that despite their lethal reputation, no ONI operator would ever shoot a civilian aircraft out of the sky so freely. After all, Naval Intelligence had enough of a black reputation already without blowing lost rich kids in puddle jumpers out of the sky - and high profile investigations were generally bad for covert bases trying to stay covert. Instead, the man in the back of the Hornet simply flicked his crafts transponder to active, the remaining seven aircraft following suit moments later as he waited to see if his plan would work...

He ruthlessly squelched a surge of triumph as the COM board finally blinked, the red warning letters vanishing to be replaced by a cool blue 'Authorized' message; the AI in CASTLE Base confirming their valid day-code IFF signature and standing down the perimeter alert. A distinctive phased radar array on the mountain somewhere that had been 'spotlighting' the formation on the Hornets EW screen snapped off moments later, and he let out the breath he had been holding as he tried to relax back into his cramped chair. Had humans been still overwatching the systems, no doubt they would have called up to

enquire exactly who they were and what they were doing here, but for the purposes of the Housekeeping AI it was sufficient that they had the codes, ergo, they were cleared to be here and it did not need to know anything more
>ONI did not encourage curiosity in its AI's anymore than it did in its flesh and blood assets.<p>

"All units, Tango Actual" he barked. "The front door is open, I say again, the front door is open. Phase two is a go, out".

A grid of acknowledgement lights on his board blinked green in response to his statement and moments later, the nose of the VTOL angled down as the pilot promptly opened the throttles and accelerated into the LZ. Granted, it would be at least a week before the base staff reached Sol on the evacuation transports and at least a week back the other way, even if they were turned around at once. But as far as he knew, there would never be a second chance at this kind of window ... so he had told his people to make every second count.

Pushing the thought that he was now irrevocably committed aside, he opened up one of the still functional SATCOM links active and linked into the Bank of New Alexandra through an untraceable double blind connection, keying a series of wire transfers from long forgotten ONI slush funds to cover the 'fees' the various actors in this game had charged. It chafed on him somewhat to have to pay for the services of these people, but he was both a realist and pragmatist in these things. And on the plus side, at least his security force was completely loyal to him and following him out of choice, because people with their unique abilities would have commanded an obscene price on the merc market...

"LZ in sight" the pilot reported moments before their craft dropped like a stone, the roar of the Hornets engines almost deafening as it decelerated from maximum cruise speed to a hover with sheer brute force, the tiny craft tilting and bucking as it headed in, fighting gravity and inertia to minimize its exposure during the insertion. The soldiers riding on the outside of the craft tightened their grips on their weapons as the clearing came into view, scanning the all too open tree line as the formation made their assault landing. The motion sensors built into the lead four craft saw nothing, but that didn't mean there wasn't camouflaged infantry ringing the LZ with heavy weapons, motionless and waiting for the right moment to blow them all from the sky as they became perfect targets. And if they were going to be ambushed, then there was no better time than now to hit them-

But almost before he finished the dark thought, the craft jolted and the engines cut back to just below takeoff thrust.

They were down.

James Ackerson slapped the quick release on his belt instantly, popping the back-seat hatch and sliding out of the cramped cockpit into the cold morning air in a single smooth movement. The 16 heavily armed soldiers who had ridden outside the lead four aircraft had already dropped to the ground, fanning out to cover the LZ as the cargo Hornets set down behind him to detach their cargo with a crackle of explosive bolts. Pausing only to retrieve his MA5K Carbine from the quick release claps just outside the cockpit door, he

slammed the armoured canopy down and jumped to the ground. Moments later, the roar of the ducted fans picked up and the significantly lighter VTOL leapt back into the sky, the quartet of aircraft vanishing into the smoky haze over this part of Reach in moments to leave only the indigent sounds of birds angry at the intrusion of the interlopers into their domain.

"Alpha, Bravo, secure the Gatehouse. Charlie, Delta, cargo" he ordered as he snapped his weapon onto a tactical sling, the perimeter dissolving with practiced precision as the fire teams went to work. The two lead fire teams spread out as they moved in on the innocuous looking cabin in a standard two-by-two cover formation, half of the troops overshooting the cabin to form an outer perimeter as the remaining team took position to cover the only visible door, all without even the faintest whisper of noise. Ackerson moved after them quickly, stripping the tactical glove from his right hand and pressing it to the slightly discoloured brick in the framework next to the door as he hoped that he wouldn't have to do this 'the hard way' as it were.

"Identity confirmed. Ackerson, James. Colonel UNA" the cool female voice of the current ONI Housekeeping AI came over the hidden speakers moments later as the palm scanner worked, followed by the brief red wink of a laser scanner sweeping his facial features and retinal pattern. "Current status, inactive - security alert zero seven. Unauthorized, access ... access ..."

Ackerson smiled as the AI trained off into an electronic buzz before, in defiance of all the security warnings that had just been issued, a green light winked on the scanner and the door smoothly slid open. At once, the waiting fire team pushed in, flicking on their weapons tactical lights as they swept the darkness for any threat, moving from room to room before the announcement came back that the building was clear.

Recessed lights in the ceiling came up as he walked inside. While on the outside the building looked like little more than a charming wood and brick frame cabin, the inside showed nothing less than a fully equipped command centre that controlled the perimeter defences of CASTLE Base. A dozen empty communications stations were set around the expansive 'living area' of the building, all facing a high definition Holotable set into a sunken pit in the centre of the room, the other half of the building given over to a barracks that in normal times housed a fast response platoon of Marines and their mongoose ATVs. Striding confidently down a pair of stairs to the Holotable, his smile grew as a sandstorm of orange particles erupted in the air above it, swirling around like a tornado before collapsing into a face from the deepest nightmares of mankind. Curled horns framed an elongated jaw and oversized eyes that blazed with holographic fire that glared from across the room.

Then it smiled.

"Base AI is now offline, I'll take over from here" it rumbled in a demonic voice that none the less contained a current of dark amusement. "I presume from your current ONI status flags that you are not here, shall we say, officially?"

"Not entirely Araquiel" Ackerson replied with a slight laugh at his situation. 'Officially' in his case depended entirely on which

official you asked. "I'm here to finish some, shall we say, 'work' downstairs?".

"Indeed" the AI purred. "The base is clear of all personnel. Doctor Catherine Halsey remained post evacuation to trigger the complex self destruct should it be compromised, but she logged out several hours ago and took a Pelican up to the _Trafalgar_. I have secured TAC-15 locally for you and I exclusively ... and regarding the situation 'downstairs' ..."

"Yes?" Ackerson asked as he gestured the fire team outside to help with the loading of their equipment, locating and hitting the switch to open the separated garage that the dirt track terminated at - in reality little more than a camouflage shell around a massive utility lift.

"There was an energy pulse from a region consistent with the area ONI suspected an alien presence might be located" the AI rumbled, the holotable activating under the avatar of the AI to show a topographical map of what was left of the Titanium mines under CASTLE base that had not been filled in by the complex itself, before the image oriented on the almost random squiggles of ancient lava tubes at the deepest layer of the map, an area just beyond them glowing a hazy red. "Unfortunately, the pulse strength was stronger than anticipated on the few instruments still active and they were saturated - I have recalibrated them to get a much more precise fix should this happen again. Triangulation in this instance was limited to the above probability zone ... but whatever you were looking for was clearly _somewhere_ in here and caused a broadband radiation event broadly similar in some ways to a Slipspace rupture, but not entirely" the AI reported, hesitating for a microsecond before continuing. "There is nothing like it in the UNSC records I have access to".

Ackerson squelched the sense of triumph that threatened to boil up at the damning evidence that he had been right all along with his suspicions about the extent of the alien presence on Reach. Ultimately, CASTLE base had been built here to investigate the initial traces of the alien presence when it had shown up. But after a few years running around old Lava tubes and finding nothing but colourful glyphs on the walls, the investigation had been sidelined and the ultra secure and secret complex repurposed into a more functional HQ. Whatever capacity had remained had been ultimately closed down with the discovery of Onyx - which had also gone nowhere in the end as it so happened. And so literally and figuratively, the ruins on Reach had been buried for half a century.

Until now.

"Could the Covenant have been responsible for activating this ... thing somehow?"

"Not impossible - although none of my sensors have detected any trace of a Covenant presence. But there is a high order probability that this is what they were looking for, their behaviour during the attack was consistent with their actions at Sigma Octanus IV and grossly inconsistent with their standard clear and burn tactics - they have gone out of their way to remove the UNSC presence with minimal planetary damage, with almost unprecedented levels of sophistry and subtlety. Far more _intriguing_ however is that a review of the raw

data shows a secondary pulse from somewhere off Reach at the precise same point in time as this main pulse. Almost, but not quite an echo..." the AI trailed off, clearly waiting to see if he could put the pieces together.

"Let me guess" Ackerson said with a raised eyebrow, "the timeframe of these pulses match the estimated time our new friends upstairs showed up?"

>Ackerson allowed himself to be amused at the surprised silence from the AI. Taking a final look around the room before stepping back outside, he fell in behind the teams humping the last of the cargo pallets into the elevator. He shot a hand signal to the perimeter guards that caused them to collapse in on him in a rear protection formation, leading them at a jog to the elevator and the rest of the team as his thoughts focused in on the surprising revelations from Araquiel.<p>

Despite his off-grid status, he remained up to date with the events that had turned the course of this war upside down in orbit over the last thirty hours - he would never have tried to pull off this Opp if he didn't have an ear to the ground, so to speak. The idea that humans from an alternate reality had emerged into the equation was absurd, yet his taps into the UNSCDF local grid had confirmed it unequivocally. If there was some kind of connection between the newcomers and whatever was buried deep in Reach's crust, he had to get to it, find out what it was before Earth got too involved with them. Personally, he had no problem with these people blasting the hell out of any Covenant ships they wanted to destroy, but neither was he going to trust that they were not working their own angle that didn't have his Earth's interests at heart.

Even if they were human.

Strike that; especially if they were human.

"At any rate" Araquiel continued over his Neural Lace linked earpiece, having finished a few thousand cycles of sulking, "all indicators are that the artifact has gone silent. As for if the activity was caused by our new friends appearing in orbit, or, if it was somehow activated by the Covenant presence and then drew in this Odyssey ... I simply do not have enough data".

"Either way, we need to get down there and figure out what we are dealing with ... before everyone else who want to get their hands on this thing join us" Ackerson replied. "This is potentially too damn important to have tied up in Fleet politics with the Covenant knocking on Earth's doors and these newcomers sniffing around. The last thing I need is to be halfway through studying whatever this thing is and get into a four way standoff with other interested parties".

"The odds of that happening seem implausibly low" the AI assured him with almost disdainful confidence ... and Ackerson frowned. No matter how human they seemed at times, AI's were ultimately at their deepest level computer systems. They were creatures of input and output. They took data and built probability assessments on it, which dived their behaviour and decision making. Even Smart AI's were rarely willing - or apparently able - to make intuitive leaps of faith as it were.

But he was not an AI.

"Tell me Araquiel" he continued as the last the outer pickets followed him into the elevator and found room, the doors closing behind them and the lift descending past the heavy blast doors capping the shaft, before plunging at speed into the planet, "are you familiar with the work of Carl Gustav Jung?"

The AI didn't reply for a full three seconds.

"I am now" the voice crackled in his ear.

"One of the greater thinkers of human behaviour" the former Colonel explained as the lift continued to drop. "His works are required reading at ONI for all command level officers as part of studies on human psychology".

"Amusing that in five centuries, humanity has changed so little that a twentieth century philosopher is still highly relevant" the AI noted. "But he seems to be quite the father of conventional thinking on humanity and human behaviour".

"Indeed he was" Ackerson agreed. "And one of the more intriguing concepts he came up with was that of Synchronicity".

"A human superstition of trying to find patterns where mere coincidence exists" Araquiel snorted dismissively. "The ability of humans to find -to _make exist_- patterns in random events never ceases to astonish me".

"I can't say I'm surprised you think that" Ackerson shrugged slightly as he leaned back against the wall as his team plunged into the depths of Reach, feeling the distant tremors of lighter blast doors closing behind them as they continued down. "You are a creature of logic Araquiel. Of causality. In your world, cause always follows effect. You and your kind are the pinnacle of rational and logical intelligence known to mankind and, irrational as humans can be, even we operate in this universe most of the time. And yet ..." he paused for a second as he frowned, trying to put his thoughts into words, "consider the situation. I and my team return to Reach after following a trail across half of human space, a trail that has led right back to Reach. We arrive mere _days_ before a massive Covenant fleet does, apparently looking for the same thing we are. At any other time, we could both turn this world upside down for years trying to figure this out. Even with what I had to help narrow the search, my mission had only even odds of success. And then, from nowhere, Synchronicity lunches out of the shadows as our goal _itself_ takes a hand in events, and works to draw all of these threads together. No clear causal link between any of this ... yet here we are. Even before we consider the entry of our new 'allies', their entry born of the same events. And all of us, racing down separate tunnels in ignorance of each other towards the same distant light".

The AI remained silent as he finished, apparently processing his statements.

"You hypothesize an underlying pattern, a _meaningful_ _coincidence_ beyond pure chance in these events?" Araquiel finally spoke up a good five seconds later - almost an eternity of a delay for a Smart AI -

as the lift started to decelerate from its breakneck speed.

"Perhaps, perhaps not" Ackerson grunted as the lift started to decelerate. "But the fact is, it has now become apparent we have been unknowingly running a race that we cannot afford to lose".

Moments later, the lift finally crashed to a halt at the bottom of the deep shaft, his troops shouldering their weapons and moving into whatever cover the stacked cargo pallets offered as the elevator doors opened to show a gleaming silver blast door with triangular logo of the Office of Naval Intelligence acid etched into it. A previously invisible seam down the centre of the door appeared as Araquel overrode the last of the lockdown protocols, and on silent hinges, the drawbridge to castle base swung smoothly open. His troops tensed on their triggers but there was no-one waiting in ambush - just an empty concrete passage ending 30 meters away in rather standard issue reception area with a set of standard issue lounges.

"Alright" Ackerson said, loading a map of the facility on his 'Spook-Com', his glasses projecting it as if it was a flat-screen floating on the wall of the lift shaft. Reaching up with his hands, he tapped the 'screen' and quickly marked out a series of waypoints, shooting the data over the TAC link to the rest of the team to highlight the most direct path to their next objective. "Get the equipment to the core elevator shaft in Sector Sigma. Once there, use the car to move our equipment to the bottom of the shaft - access code is Bravo Bravo Six Nine One One Seven Enable. On the bottom floor, you'll find a stairwell down to the caverns under the complex. I want base camp set up in fifteen minutes. Araquel, the base AI, is in the loop on this Opp so if you need help, call him. I'll join you all as soon as I finish up some work in my office. Lethal force remains authorized, but only if absolutely necessary".

"Sir" the team leader spoke up. "I strong recommend you take a fire team with you-"

"I can look after myself Petty Officer" he dismissed the others concerns as he shut down the map and turned to face the Spartan-III towering over him in his SPC armour. "I trust Araquel when he says the base is clear. We cannot say the same for the tunnels - the Covenant may have compromised them and have stay-behind forces in play".

"Yes Sir" the other replied. Clearly, the Spartan wasn't happy about it, but he was equally far too disciplined to dispute the order, instead leading a fire team down the corridor with the rest of his team falling into guard around the cargo pallets as they moved out after him.

>Ackerson followed but turned right when they turned left at the end of the corridor, threading his way through and past empty offices, conference rooms, laboratories and storerooms by memory. He distantly noted the desks left open and hurriedly emptied of anything critical, half disassembled computer servers with their rows of memory crystals missing and even the occasional smell of burned electronics that signified where what could not be easily moved had been destroyed to deny any chance of the Covenant getting a hold of ONIs secrets. He wasn't actually heading for his office, he had little doubt HIGHCOM would have torn it to pieces by now uselessly trying to find out

where he was, so instead he passed through a dozen different unlocked security doors and past a half dozen unmanned checkpoints into the Omega wing, navigating his way to a frosted glass door marked with only a room number.<p>

For the first time since embarking on this venture he actually hesitated, if only for a moment. But steeling himself, he squared his shoulders, twisted the handle and stepped inside ... before raising an eyebrow at what awaited him.

For a genius scientist, Catherine Halsey worked in one _hell _of a mess.

Letting the door softly close behind him as the office lights came on, he took his time to study the room he had never seen before, taking in everything without comment. Her desk was piled with various papers, scientific journals and engineering schematics, with small clusters of polystyrene cups poking through the mess here and there. A thick leather bound journal sat haphazardly on the edge of the table, with a small computer terminal offsetting it on the other side ... but the typically personal touches most people would decorate their desk with over time were notable almost entirely by their absence.

"Araquiel" he said finally, "go dark on this room".

There was a beep in his earpiece, then nothing as the AI disconnected from the rooms systems leaving him completely alone. Slowly, he walked around her desk towards the far wall, his gaze drawn by the hundreds of old fashioned photographs covering it. Seventy or so were framed, an eclectic mixture of adult figures in power armour and dress uniforms, others of young children who James knew were long dead. But the rest of the collages of pictures around them that had been taped to the wall en masse relatively recently...

"You really are a son of a bitch, you know that?" he finally addressed the undeniable presence of the person this room belonged to as he studied the photos, putting names to each of them as he passed his gaze over them.

Robert ... Shane ... Jane ... Adam ... Min ...

"The idea that you alone are the only person in this universe who has had to live with hard decisions, to the point of making an entire wall of them, as if announcing to everyone who visits you 'look upon my work and despair' ... and yet, somehow, the arrogance fits you like a _glove_". Pivoting away from the mass of children, Ackerson walked along the wall as the lines of pictures gave way to various shelves and cabinets, studying the few non-work items scattered on top of them as he passed, shaking his head slightly at the odds and ends. Here an ancient coin in a velvet backed frame, there a somewhat scruffy _teddy bear _of all things?

"I'll admit, for the longest time I underestimated you - no" he corrected himself, "I didn't _understand _you" he said to the presence that had owned this room for decades. "I saw you as nothing but a scientist - a _civilian_ scientist - who enjoyed the challenge of her work and to hell with any questions of ethics or morality. Here an equation to be solved, there an engineering exercise on a computer screen, but nothing more than that. After all, you never

served the UNSC - you just worked for it. You never chose to put your life in the hands of another soldier and asked them to put their lives in yours, never had to make the snap decision to send some of them to their deaths for the sake of the mission - it was all cold, indifferent numbers for you. And I can accept that".

He paused for a moment as he returned to her desk, idly shifting through the piles of documents with a distracted air as he sat down on the corner of the ancient wooden furniture.

"You're not an idiot Catherine. You knew what you were doing, what you were getting into. ONI demanded it, HIGHCOM wanted it and the UEG would turn a blind eye for it - so you gave them exactly what they all wanted. What Earth needed. You gave us the tool we needed to avert a full scale Civil War - one most predictions showed would turn the Outer Colonies into a nuclear level quagmire if we had to go in with fleets and armies to stop the Innies before the lunatic fringe taking over the movement did it to us. And when the Covenant arrived, we had the proven template for mass producing the only weapon we had in our arsenal that might just help us survive as a species against the most powerful force humanity had ever come up against..."

Suddenly energised, Ackerson rebounded off the desk to his feet, his weapon swinging freely on its sling as started to pace around the room.

"You saw the same reports I did" he continued with his anger boiling as he reflected back on the dark days when the true scale of the Covenant threat steadily became apparent and shattered humanities belief of its place in the universe. "You knew what we were up against; the only chance we had to even slow down the Covenant were extreme tactics - we needed every weapon in our arsenal. Your thirty Spartans were good, even I'll admit that, but they couldn't be everywhere at once! We needed more. But you? You shut down the entire program!" he almost exploded, frustration pouring out of every clenched muscle as he turned to glare back at her desk and the empty chair behind it.

"Forget the Covenant forces pouring into the Outer Colonies burning everything in their wake. Don't think about the millions, hell, billions dying in agony as Covenant Cruisers sweep over their city with glassing beams. Why would you make the hard but necessary choices as people die by the planet load - the same choices you had made before without hesitation?" he asked before he snorted and looked away. "After all" he continued in a quieter tone, "what is all that suffering compared to a guilty conscience?"

Unsurprisingly, the chair didn't answer him as he closed his eyes for a moment and let his emotion drain out before he again turned his gaze towards the wall and the hundreds of pictures of so many Spartan-IIIs who had died long ago, the eyes in each photo tracking him in that odd way pictures did.

All of them looking at him in silent accusation.

An accusation that he could never refute, but neither did he look away.

"That's the difference between you and me Catherine" he decided

finally. "You see, unlike you, I accept that I'm a monster ... because I can live with it. Because sometimes you need a monster to fight monsters. I've damned myself to hell Gods knows how many times in this job, sent boys and girls, sent out children to die screaming on some god forsaken rock in the depths of space where no-one will even know ... because in the final analysis, it brought time we needed. I traded hundreds of lives for tens of billions. I cashed in my soul for years more time to try and find a way to stop the Covenant" he admitted, his eyes burning as the exhaustion for the first time showed through. "But just when I finally crack the code, when I finally unlock what might be the door to our salvation, when I am about to redeem those sacrifices with ultimate victory and vindication..." he shook his head slowly with his eyes closed, a half forlorn, half bitter expression flashing across his face.

Turning away from the wall of pictures as he found himself unable to continue his tirade in the face of a surge of exhaustion that had nothing to do with the lack of sleep he had had recently, Ackerson instead approached a map of UNSC space noting the red markings Halsey had scrawled in on it. Each mark he could see represented a world the Covenant had burned; a dagger that pushed in from distant Harvest all the way to the heart of the UNSC now, with smaller thrusts breaking out like mini hydras towards other worlds as the Covenant methodically worked their way through human space, blindly feeling their way inexorably towards Earth.

How many more worlds, he asked silently, would have been just as coldly marked off if many of these 'side thrusts' hadn't been stopped dead by the sacrifices of his Spartans?

How much time had been gained by the destruction of entire fleets of Covenant ships docked at refuelling stations?

What Covenant offensives had ground to a halt because the local sources of spare parts had vanished in a cloud of HAVOK demolition charges far behind their lines? Buying time to evacuate entire Colonies and stiffen the next line of defence?

Few humans would ever know the truth. But he did. And that was enough.

Mentally, he drew a line across the map, tracking his activity over the last few months that had unerringly led him from the core of the UNSC to the outer fringes and back again. First from Reach to Onyx to oversee the Gamma Company selection process for the augmentation procedures. And then -in theory- back to Reach to oversee Halseys latest obscene budget increase for her new Mark V armour tests. Except just before his ship had been scheduled to leave Onyx, a Slipspace COM probe had arrived sent by none other than Margaret Parangosky.

The instructions had been as typically 'to the point' as only the head of Naval Intelligence could be. Leave orbit effective receipt of message and proceed to a deep space rendezvous with a prowler seventy light years away near a former human system named Jericho. And while in any other branch in the navy, getting direct orders from The Boss over two intermediate officers would be highly unusual and might even lead to one questioning their orders, the fact was that there were exactly two ground rules common across all of ONI.

One. Always keep your mouth shut.

Two. If Parangosky gave an order, you didn't stop to ask how high, you jumped for the room, stealing an ODSST jetpack if you could get away with it, and didn't stop going up until she said so.

It took fifteen days at the Prowlers best sustained speed to reach the rendezvous, a long range freighter that looked completely harmless -meaning it had to be an ONI special action job- with a very surprising cargo of the twenty Spartan III Commandos of Stiletto Team. A unit unknown even to Commander Ambrose back on Onyx, Stiletto was comprised of twenty Spartans ONI had created without almost anyone knowing, becoming a personal Wet-Work unit under the direct authority of the troika of officers who ran the Office of Naval Intelligence. The good people at ONI had done work even beyond the Spartan II and Spartan III programs, twisting the often traumatized youngsters minds around until the group had meshed into a new tightly knit family. One that combined an indifference to the necessity of completing their missions at any cost above and beyond their peers with much more combat experience than the typical Spartan III - the perfect 'personal knife' for the higher ups in ONI.

Ackerson didn't know who they had been shoved into, and he knew better to ask, greeting them amiably and taking his sealed order from them, unsurprised to see that these two had clearly come straight from the boss. Apparently, some ONI compartment he didn't need to know about had developed a possible translation for some of the ruins under CASTLE Base on Reach. Using translation matrixes developed from Onyx, they had isolated what they thought were stellar coordinates in one of the few intact glyphs ONI had uncovered, which either pointed to the Jericho star system ... or some location around Andromeda. Silly as he had thought the use of increasingly precious ONI resources was, Parangosky had authorized a Prowler fly by through the system to look for a needle in a haystack ... and it had run smack bang into a Covenant force that shouldn't have been anywhere near there.

And succinctly put - if it was of major interest to the Covenant, it was also of major interest to ONI.

Further piquing ONIs interest had been an old mission report about an alien structure the Covenant and UNSC had fought over during the Second Battle of Harvest. The limited information sent back from their agent on board the Spirit of Fire before it had vanished had been one of ONIs enduring mysteries, but as the Covenant had glassed the entire site from orbit shortly after, it had appeared to be a mystery that would never be solved. But a cross check by some analyst on a hunch had hit the jackpot, with multiple and startling similarities between the two sites. It was yet more evidence for the increasingly accepted theory that the Covenants technology was based at least partially on them scavenging and imitating some ancient races technology they had been lucky enough to stumble onto.

His mission orders didn't exactly say it, but it was blindingly clear that ONI reasoned that if the Covenant could do it, so could humanity. The bad news was that this far out, there was simply no time to assemble a full Naval expedition to investigate the situation. And perhaps even more pertinently, the odds were low that the fleet, already stretched to breaking point, would commit major

resources this far out for an extended period of time. So once again, it had come down to his brainchild to step up and do what fleets and armies could not.

The first indication the Covenant excavation force had that the UNSC had found them was when the CCS class Cruiser orbiting half a klick above the surface of the moon exploded. The Cruiser was heavy armed, heavily shielded and capable of launching a legion of Seraphs to support itself meaning any _direct _attack by the lightly armed prowler was about as advisable as sending in a Marine draftee with a pair of sharpened sticks and a rock in against a fully armed Spartan II in power armour. It would have taken a full UNSC flotilla to deal with it in a direct battle, and the fleet could have been expected at the very least to lose several ships in the action.

It was however -quite literally as it turned out- child's play for a pair of Spartans in SPI suits to attach a Fury device to the underside of a Covenant Wraith on its way back to the ship from a patrol across the airless terrain without being noticed. With no idea his vehicle had been turned into an impromptu delivery system, the board minor Elite driving the tank had carefully ascended the main gravity lift into its vehicle bay, passing smoothly through the atmospheric field into the ship's atmosphere without the need to re-pressurize the bay. His last thought had been a bitter resentment that he had been assigned to such duty, as holy as it may be, when all he craved was the glory of going into combat against human forces.

He would not, however, live long enough to appreciate the irony of his final thought as the device activated.

Even as the flaming chunks of the warship had been scattered across the moon's already well cratered surface, the Spartans were moving in hard and fast, boring in from all directions around the Covenant base that found itself momentarily frozen in shock as the cruiser above them turned into a short lived meteor shower. The highly confusing situation created the perfect opening for the special forces teams as they ruthlessly followed their training and doctrine to take advantage of that short space of time between shocked hesitation and training kicking in to press their advantage without mercy. Guided by telemetry links from the invisible high-orbit Prowler, each Spartan had fired off hundreds of guided rockets from the Zero-G booster frames they were riding almost simultaneously from behind the ample cover of varied canyons and ridges around the Covenant base. Surprise was total, few overloaded Covenant sensors even saw the swarm until the last moment and not one Elite reacted fast enough to sound an alarm, for whatever good it may have done.

Like a multi-headed hydra, the swarm of Multiple Independently Targeted Missiles had torn through the Covenant Citadel and its ancillary buildings before the confused Elites had been able to so much as raise their defensive shields. A single Seraph, already crewed and on alert did manage to launch as the structure exploded around it, but it had barely enough to arm its weapons before a trio of OF-92's had dropped into its six and blown it out of the sky, pairs of the craft sweeping across the area and blasting to pieces anything that looked even remotely intact for a good minute before reforming to head for the still intact Airlock structure the Covenant had built over the alien entrance itself.

Without the slightest hesitation, Stiletto team had leapt from their craft on single use thruster packs, sending the Booster frames back to the prowler on auto pilot as they had descended to the surface of the moon in the most rapid way possible, assaulting the remaining Covenant troops who had belatedly started to try and form a defensive line, if only to buy time for their comrades inside the alien structure. It had been a completely useless gesture of course; twenty Spartans hitting the ground shooting were the next best thing to a force of nature and a handful of lightly armed security troops barely qualified as a training exercise for them. Even as Ackerson had touched down in the lead Pelican following up with the tech teams and equipment, the Spartans had already cleared the few remaining external defences and simply blown the airlock wide open, breaching both sides simultaneously and letting the explosive decompression send the Grunts, Jackals and Elites who had been waiting in ambush inside go pinwheeling across the moon's surface helplessly. Pausing only long enough to roll his eyes at the Covenant not positioning vacuum rated combat gear inside the structure and offload the equipment into the Transport hogs, Ackerson had quickly regathered his troops and taken charge, navigating past the twisted purple remains of the Covenant airlock and into a structure like nothing he had ever seen before.

Absolutely undamaged from the hell outside, he had found a world of perfectly straight geometries woven into the walls, floor and the ceiling of a trapezoidal passage, all of it speaking of a complexity and a pattern beyond his easy recognition. Yet it none the less captured his attention for how different it was to anything human or Covenant that he had ever seen -neither strictly functional nor overly elaborate, it just seemed to ... fit ... seamlessly into the tunnel, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Somewhat more interesting from a technological point of view was that despite the lack of any clear light source the passage was well lit; with a warm white light seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. Normalized gravity too had returned the moment they had crossed the threshold but probably the most disconcerting thing was that despite the fact that this complex had to have been around for tens of thousands of years at least, everything looked as if it had only been built yesterday - perfectly preserved against the passing of the years and still fully functional.

It gave him hope. Hope that instead of the kind of ancient ruins that made archaeologists happy and board everyone else to tears that ONI had been finding for many long years, they just might have finally found something big.

And if we can do so while giving the Covenant a bloody nose, so much the better.

It took several minutes, but soon enough the curving passage straightened out and terminated in a wider chamber. At the far end was what could only be a door, looking as it did like the same portal they had passed through on the far side of the Covenant airlock. The Covenant had turned this antechamber into a forward operating position, with squat square purple supply crates and weapons racks lining the side walls, along with various other pieces of equipment he didn't recognize. A half dozen more Elites were sprawled out dead down here along with as a number of Covenant Engineers - which was a damn shame, because ONI had been trying to take one prisoner for the longest time without any luck. Bringing back a number of those to

Section III probably would have earned him a promotion to flag rank, in of itself.

Oh well. C'est la vie.

More interesting, he noted as the Hogs came to a halt in a line with the Spartans dismounting to police the bodies and Covenant gear, was that there were no 'lesser' species around. This many Elites would typically be supported by dozens of Grunts, with a secondary unit of Jackal specialists backing them up, but as his Spartans secured the area, he realized that the Elites alone held sway down here.

Mentally, he filed that note for later comment in his AAR, and waited for the 'Clear!' call to come accross the local COM system. When it did, he and the support staff dismounted and got to work unloading their mountain of analysis equipment, most critically the processing core, fusion plants and sensor systems that would allow their analysis AI to be brought online and get to work. A new cutting edge 4th Generation AI, it would be doing most of the hard 'leg work' in trying to access the alien systems, backed up by the few human specialists ONI had managed to send out and to them would fall the unenviable task of trying to get them inside, grab whatever they could get and get it away before the Covenant came back with a fleet and blew them all halfway to the Galactic rim.

As it so happened, there was no need for billion credit hardware at all. At least to get the front door opened.

It was Kerry-303 who 'cracked' it. Helping to drag away one of the dead Covenant Engineers, she had just so happened to brush her hand over a small free standing pedestal ten meters back from the door - a pedestal that had clearly been the focus of the strange creatures attentions given it was roughly where all the bodies had fallen. It was an safe guess from its position that it was probably a door control of some kind, and given the Covenants apparent lack of progress, it would have been a presumed safe bet to say that simply brushing up against it had rather little chance of causing anything to happen.

The Spartan had gripped the edge of the pedestal to set herself while she lifted the dead Engineer that was her focus up and over her shoulder. Then she had stumbled and almost fallen as the pedestal she had been bracing against had simply disintegrated, fading away into an orange mist of some kind as if it had been no more substantial than air. In its place, at her feet was a glowing icon on the floor, the oddest shape of a circle with a brief downward line at its base. For a moment as all activity in the chamber screeched to a halt with shouts of alarm over the communications links it had glowed brightly, before seeming to disintegrate as if a wind was blowing and tearing it to tiny pieces, sending thousands of fragments exploding out along the floor, then the walls and roof of the chamber. A few of the more nervous techs jumped with startled curses as the wave swept past them, the 'fragments' bounding around -or perhaps even inside- the surface of the chamber for a spectacular few seconds, until like bubbles circling a drain, they were draw, more and more quickly into a tiny protrusion at the apex of the diamond shaped door. For a half dozen utterly silent heartbeats nothing happened as no-one dared to even breath, but then a blazing orange beam exploded out from the protrusion, directed precisely at the frozen Kerry and enveloping her

in an orange halo of light.

Every Spartan in the chamber snapped their weapons up in unison, even as Kerry slowly held her hand to her face and twisted it around, apparently fascinated by the play of light passing over her suit - but luckily their iron discipline held and no-one opened fire. Yet.

"Its scanning her!" a member of the tech team yelled over TEAMCOM. Ackerson snapped his head to the side away from his transfixed Spartan to one of the ONI specialists -Chalmers he recalled- waving a hand held scanner at the Spartan from a few meters away as orange light reflected and bounced from the shimmering walls, the tech walking forward almost fearlessly and waving her scanner around the unmoving Spartan. "It's not Covenant! High frequency, unknown type-"

"Check fire!" Ackerson yelled to calm down the Spartans before one of them did something stupid with a rocket launcher. He didn't know how she had triggered it, but they couldn't afford to damage whatever mechanism this was. "Petty Officer-"

"I'm good" the Spartan replied quickly, lowering her arms slowly to stand straight as light ran up and down the skin of her Special Purpose Combat suit before it suddenly snapped off and seemed to 'retreat' back to the top of the door. Then, straight as a laser, the glowing sphere of energy shot straight down the middle of the door and vanished into the floor without a trace as perfectly as it had come from nowhere in the first place... but in its wake, it had left an almost invisible seam on the door. And with a rumble Ackerson felt through his boots, the angular geometry layered over the door started to move. Folding, unfolding, some of the complex shapes simply seemed to vanish into nothing. It was in his amazed mind, less like a door opening so much as the entire wall simply rearranging itself. And almost before his stunned eyes could really take it in, the entire 'door' had simply folded itself away into non existence.

"Huh" Chalmers finally said into the strained, amazed silence over TEAMCOM. "Well...that happened" she observed, turning to glance at the Spartan still staring in wonder at the opening before her. "How did you do that exactly?"

"I ... don't know" the Commando replied helplessly. "I just brushed past that stand and ... well ..."

"Curious" the other replied with a frown. "According to the Covenant BattleNet intercepts we picked up, they hadn't even gotten close to cracking the door yet. And I doubt they are complete idiots, they certainly have a lot more experience with these places than us. But you just touching it-"

"Worry about it later" Ackerson snapped, stepping forward and pointing towards the darkness on the other side of the door with a curt hand gesture. "Move".

Energised by the clear order, the Spartans blurred into motion past him and bounded through the door, all except a single fire team holding back to guard their exit as well as the bulk of the techs, all of whom shook off the events and got back to work setting up

their field gear. He personally ignored the flow of people around him as he approached the door and passed through, noting the light level dropping dramatically as he passed the threshold. He turned around quickly, could still see the people and equipment behind him just fine ... but it was as if the ambient light from behind was somehow being halted at the threshold. Which was impossible, but for some reason he was starting to get the distinct feeling that the people who had built this place had a rather different view of the word 'impossible' as it related to physics as he understood it.

Killing his VISORs image enhancement mode as it started to go into a constant restart cycle trying to make sense of it, he turned back as Chalmers hurried past him through the opening-

And almost crashed into the back of her as the tech came to a sudden, unexpected halt.

"My God" Chalmers muttered, letting her heavy scanner drop to rest on its strap as she trained her head around rapidly like some kind of targeting array, seemingly trying to take everything in at once before she jerked back into motion after the Spartans. "This is _incredible_"

And as he too looked around taking in what she had seen, he decided that he couldn't really dispute her observation. In fact, he didn't actually say _anything_. All he _could_ do, he found through a suddenly dry throat, was nod to silently and walk after her.

The alien 'base' for lack of a better word was a spherical cavern at least a kilometre in diameter apparently carved out of the crust of the moon a very long time ago. The same angular construction over a perfectly polished surface filled the small chamber that led from the doorway to a small platform overlooking the cavern in question, but now those wall patterns were traced with softly glowing blue and green highlights along the edges, all of which seemed to subtly pulse and shift as you looked at them. It was an almost hypnotic effect - and it took a degree of effort to tear his gaze away from the lights and keep moving, noting that the patterns also spread across the floor and ceiling, but he couldn't feel the slightest texture different in the floor as he walked over the strips, as if it was perfectly a part of the surface.

Was it writing? Some kind of alien circuitry? A purely decorative motif?

For the first time he felt a sense of uncertainty, as if perhaps they were moving too far too fast, playing with things they simply didn't understand ... but he pushed it aside. He didn't have time to be careful this deep in Covenant controlled space.

He could only hope that fortune would favour the bold ... or perhaps the foolish. Because honestly, they were so far the point of trying to determine which was which now...

Presently, he caught up with the rest of the group of Spartans and Chalmers, all of them spread out along the sheer drop at the end of the cavern and keeping firmly in control of himself -and triple checking that his suits mission recorders were running constant full spectrum scans and recordings, he took a careful look around.

The ceiling of the cavern arched upwards and away from them in a great, yet slightly flattened curve, devoid of the angular topography that had marked the passage they had just come through. But in the middle of the vast space was an angular, almost inverted pyramid structure suspended above the bottom of the cavern by a network of slender struts. A raised platform crowned the structure, emplaced by his reckoning precisely underneath the middle of the apex of the chamber above it. The side of the structure facing him held what looked like a landing identical to and in line with the one they were standing on, with stairs leading up it to connect to the platform at its apex.

It was a stunning engineering achievement - no question. And if the Covenant had been stripping places like this of whatever they could get their filthy and varied appendages on, it was little wonder they had such impressive technology at their disposal.

But now..._now _the tide may well have turned.

"Okay" he said over the communications channel, forcing a controlled, all business tone into his voice, the thought of the look on Margaret Parangosky's face and the guess at what she might do to him for screwing this up doing wonders for focusing his attention. "Now what?"

"Well..." Chalmers gulped, far less experienced than him in hiding her feelings behind a mask of professionalism, "we need to get over there ... I think".

The Colonel managed to not roll his eyes at the absurdity of the statement, finding himself for a half second wishing that despite their rather enormous differences ONI's chief scientist was here. As he was quite sure Catherine Halsey would never have said anything so damn stupid.

"Yes. We do" he agreed in a level voice. "But _how_ do you propose we do that?"

"Well..." the scientist said slowly, appearing to finally shake off her stunned state and focus on the job as the silent Spartans were doing around her. "Logically whoever made this place would have had a way to get across - we simply have to find it. The fact that they have stairs on the other side" he gestured towards them with a hand "suggests that whoever these people are, they are almost certainly bipedal like us. Roughly the same size as us too, and they walk more than float ... so there may be a bridge that extends? Or a platform that floats over?"

"What about this Sir?" one of the Spartans - Mike-254 according to his HUD - asked diffidently, the Spartans listening to the conversation but only speaking up if they had anything to add.

Turning around, he found the Spartan standing off to the side of the platform most of the team had crowded onto. He hadn't noticed it before, but there was indeed a pedestal somewhat similar to the one they had seen outside that had opened the entrance door, this one not free standing but built into the slightly raised edge of the floor that marked the 'Do Not Walk Past Here Unless You Can Fly' point of the cavern.

With what looked like perhaps a blue glowing button set in the top of it?

"Give it a try Petty Officer" Ackerson replied with a slight shrug. It certainly seemed promising.

Ackerson was half expecting that a bridge would unlock and extend, connecting this extended landing they were standing on with its opposite on the far side. Or perhaps that some kind of guide rails would connect, and the platform would be shuffled across the cavern - or perhaps just float if their technology was as advanced as it appeared.

He certainly hadn't expected what did happen though.

The second the Spartan tapped the button, a blue light started to glow in the gap between the two landings, causing Ackerson to spin back around in excitement. It was a diffuse glow at first, but quickly it strengthened and focused until suddenly, with a ripple that leapt from underneath their landing across to the other, a bridge of blue light materialized. Five or six meters wide and several hundred long, with yet more subtle patterns of light playing inside it, he froze for several long seconds at the sight, like nothing he had ever seen before.

With extreme caution, Ackerson shifted up to the edge of the landing where the blue light seamlessly seemed to 'flow' into the physical reality of the landing. His gaze was focused on the remarkable sight but his awareness was still up to the task of restraining Chalmers as she ran up next to him, the tech seeming ready to just try and jump right onto it until he gave her a stern look that calmed her back down. The last thing he needed was for her to go falling to her death after all.

Crouching down at the edge of the 'real' landing, he looked closely at the light, seeing yet smaller levels of complexity playing inside it, before he cautiously reached out to touch it gently.

It felt solid. Remarkably so in fact, with a subtle texture - almost like rock - and not the perfectly frictionless surface his mind for some reason had expected.

He shifted his weight, pushing down harder and then with his full force, but the bridge of light did not give in the slightest as he did. Next to him, Chalmers was waving her portable scanning unit slowly back and forth at point blank range, the readings being directly pumped back into her HUD, but from the reflected glow on her face, he could see she looked as astonished as he felt.

"Astonishing" he observed said as he stood back up. "Some kind of forcefield?"

"Uh...not according to these readings" Chalmers replied with a bewildered look, waving her scanner back and forth. "According to this it's just ... light".

"It felt pretty substantial for 'just light' to me" he pointed out dryly.

"Clearly so" she agreed without any hint that she had detected the sarcasm in his tone. "But none the less, its showing absolutely none of the kind of readings we've seen from Covenant shield technology before". Plucking a long and thin data wand from a holder on her upper arm, Chalmers reached out to tap the device against the 'side' of the bridge-

-and the wand was sheered in half without the slightest sign of resistance, half of it starting the long, long trip down to the depths of the darkened cavern.

"It's also only, as far as these readings show" she continued without the slightest change in her tone, "a single photon thick". She looked at the data wand and the impossibly smooth cut there. "Similar in some ways to an Elites plasma sword in fact, but vastly more ... robust".

"Will it take our weight?" Ackerson asked, getting a shrug in return.

"One would hope so" she said unhelpfully, turning to look at one of the Spartans. "With your permission?"

"Go ahead" he nodded, stepping back as the tech gestured a cluster of the silent Spartans forward.

First she had one of them step onto the edge of the light bridge, backwards so he was facing the way he had come with his teammates holding one of his hands each, ready to yank him back should the bridge fail.

It didn't fail.

Then she had the Spartan try jumping up and down, accelerating the not entirely insubstantial mass of the Spartan into the bridge of light several times.

The Spartan reported that he couldn't feel even the slightest give in it.

Finally, the Spartan, under her instructions, pulled his combat knife and with all the incredibly significant force the augmented human could muster, drove it - from the relative safety of the landing - into the edge of the light bridge, sharp edge first.

The high quality blade simply shattered, sending fragments of metal everywhere.

The light bridge remained utterly marked and undamaged. For some reason, this seemed to annoy the Doctor who was clearly befuddled over what to make of the situation, but it was good enough for him. Overruling her desire to probably study the fascinating bridge of light until the local star turned into a red giant in a few tens of millions of years, Ackerson had sent the first Spartan across. Despite the tests they had performed, and despite the armed thruster pack on the Commandos back that was ready to be triggered at a moment's notice to convert any fall to a safe landing on one of the support columns for the main structure underneath the bridge, everyone held their breath until the Spartan reached the far

side.

Then, one at a time, the remaining personnel followed. The Spartans first, the commandos moving across quickly to start sweeping the structure in pairs, finding nothing of interest on the lower levels except featureless open chambers. Ackerson then lead the non combat personnel across, marvelling at the technology as he looked through the transparent surface into the darkness under him. It was slow going this way, but without any idea of the structural load limits of this technology, he was only willing to take a calculated risk with his personnel, waiting until everyone was across before leading them to the apex of the structure.

And the greatest discovery in human history since the invention of the Shaw-Fujikawa drive.

After that, he had returned to Reach as fast as he could, arriving less than a week ago with his prowlers engines almost burned out from the speed run from the edges of UNSC space. And his haste had only brought him into a world turned upside down, his private ONI channel holding only a single datapoint that stated in the briefest of words that they were burning the connection from their end because 'things' were happening. Deciding to remain 'off the grid' until he sorted out what the hell was going on, he had slowly pieced together the events that had taken place eventually, and forced himself to take a couple of days to think through the situation.

While the loss of the Spartan III program was a blow, in all honestly he knew it had been just about played out as a viable program. Not that he wasn't proud of what it had accomplished, but it had now done its job - to buy enough time for humanity to find a game changer. The only remaining question, was where he went from here.

For one thing, with ONI having been 'broken' by Hood, his ability to skip all the oversight and bureaucratic red tape to finish his mission quickly had become far more limited. Even in the best case scenario, it would probably take weeks for the R&D people to go over all his data before making any kind of conclusions, let alone decisions. Which, given that the Covenant were all but right next door to the core of the Inner Colonies now, could cost humanity everything. And in the worst case scenario, that bleeding heart Stanforth might just shoot him on sight on general principal and destroy everything he had worked for right then and there, before he could even begin to explain what he had discovered - and the thought of that had killed any thoughts of simply reporting in normally to his department then and there.

In the end, the choice was not his. On the second day of his sulking around in the periphery of the Reach system with almost all of his crew still in Cryo, the Covenant had arrived.

He had listened to the reports in some horror coming in from Reach. First the scattered sightings and alerts of Covenant forces on the ground, then the Zealot class Elites leading recon teams and Stealth Corvettes coming from nowhere - all of it told him that the Covenant had come looking for something, not simply to glass the world. And the only possible thing they could be looking for was the same thing he was.

There was no longer time to ask permission, he'd ask forgiveness when he had been triumphantly vindicated for getting his objective off the planet before the Covenant got their hands on it.

He knew ONI would evacuate CASTLE Base at once, giving him a window of opportunity to get in and out. Large infusions of cash had provided the last tools he needed and, all the while cursing how slow it had been to get this Op set up, he had finally gotten it underway this morning.

After the Covenant had already been beaten off by these new players in the game.

But he had not looked back from his decision. They had just come terrifyingly close to losing the trail for good or, even worse, letting the Covenant get their hands on it. He wouldn't make that mistake again. If these newcomers were somehow linked in with this whole mess, then in his mind it was even more important to gain control for the UNSC - for leverage alone if nothing else. He no longer had the time to waste asking 'what if'. Nor could he take the risk of it slipping out of humanities hands, as had seemed possible for a heart stopping few days.

Presently, Ackerson brought his attention back to the room he was in, glaring at the seat of the woman who owned the room. No matter what she may have through, no matter what she said about him over and over, he had never wanted any of this responsibility or any of the blood on his hands.

But like it or not, he had it.

So if this the role fate had assigned him, so be it. He would do whatever it took. Because of the single thing he truly loved in this life. The single thing he had sacrificed so much for, and may now be called to sacrifice everything for.

Earth.

"Goodbye Catherine" he said with a tone of finality, knowing that win or lose, he would never set foot in this office, or see his bane again. Striding out of Omega Wing without so much as a glance over his shoulder or a break in his step, he left his doubts behind in her office. And without breaking step, he flung the door open and moved like a tempest through the spotless white and steel passageways, finding his way to the old elevators that would get him down into the tunnels, mentally setting himself to do whatever it took from this point on to finish his mission.

And to hell with anyone who got in his way.

6. Chapter 6

****Chapter 4.**** King Under the Mountain

****0820 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>USS ****_Odyssey_******, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System**

It was amazing, Hank Landry thought as he stirred his coffee, _what a good night's sleep - and copious amounts of military-grade caffeine - could do to improve one's outlook on a situation._

Barely 24 hours had passed since the last of the Covenants warships had fled the Epsilon Eridani system and conceded the battlefield to the UNSC, but that had not meant the enemy was defeated. Isolated pockets of Covenant units who had been deployed by the fleet to hit targets other than the orbital generators had found themselves trapped behind enemy lines at that point. And with both air and space superiority restored, the few scattered and uncoordinated Covenant troops on the ground had proved easy targets for airmobile UNSC forces backed by Frigates that systematically moved across the globe and wiped out every last Covenant soldier on the planet. No call for surrender had been answered by anything but gunfire - and it left Landry feeling more aware than ever of the comparisons Mitchell had made yesterday between the Ori and Covenant; their sheer level of fanaticism made a Japanese Kamikaze pilot look almost sane by comparison.

But even as the Battle for Reach had wound down on the ground, in space the UNSC had only stepped up its activity as it tried to get a handle on the sheer devastation across the orbital infrastructure around the planet - no small task when it had been sitting in the crossfire of two fleets throwing everything short of the kitchen sink at each other. Even the routine task of coordinating search and rescue ops in the immediate aftermath had tied up most of the attention of the Captains and Admirals in the fleet and so by mutual consent, Landry and Whitcomb had postponed their planned meeting a day and a bit until eleven AM, local time, today.

>After securing his own fighters and working out shift rotations to make sure all the Odysseys personnel got some rest, Landry had also retired, knowing he would need to be sharp and fresh when he met with the UNSC delegation. Moral still seemed solid despite their predicament - the crew viewed it as a case of _when _not _if _they would get home with Colonel Samantha Carter on the case - but it was hard to tell how long it would hold up. The Ori were still there back in their home Universe and even with the threat of the Ancient drone weapons platform on Earth apparently dissuading the Ori fleet from attacking their home, that kind of skittishness wasn't going to last much longer as they steadily consolidated their grip on the Galaxy and looked to crush the remaining holdouts.

Simply put, they had to get home, and get home soon. And to do that, they needed help.

Ergo, they needed the UNSCs help.

The logic was straightforward - good enough at any rate help him push aside the enormity of his choices for now. Jumping the United States of America into a war entirely on his own recognisance was not something he would be inclined to make a habit of, even with the far looser leash the Pentagon held around his neck compared to the vast majority of his peers in the US military. Still, he didn't have the time or energy to waste on second guessing his actions -especially as the Pentagon, Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Command Authority would do so for him as soon as he got back - so he mentally pressed on, letting the hot caffeine wash away his doubts to let him focus on the future.

Right now, Marks was finishing a recap of the events logged by the skeleton bridge crew since he gone to bed. Additional UNSC warships had arrived in system both individually and in small flotillas through the night, a constant trickle of ships slowly bringing the number of combat ready warships in-system back above sixty. Another fifty or so ships damaged in the battle had been towed into the first of the shipyards that had been brought back online, where they were even now being swarmed by an impressive array of drone spacecraft and suited workers. A dozen had already been cycled out after apparently being resupplied, still combat worthy enough to take up positions in the orbital defence network despite damaged armor or missing engines. However most of the rest looked like they were just being broken up for spare parts, the once proud ships now little more than hulks too far gone to be worth any effort at repairing - a pointed testament to the firepower of the Covenant Plasma weaponry.

>Still other ships, a mixture of military and civilian utility ships, were working nonstop trying to police the space debris from the battle before any of it crashed into something expensive, or, even worse, down onto a city or habituated area on the planet. The larger pieces of ships were being towed to geosynchronous industrial facilities where Marks guessed they would be used as feedstock for the factories there, but most of the smaller pieces were simply being pushed towards Reach on trajectories that would have them harmlessly impact the middle of the planets oceans, while yet smaller utility ships worked to clean up the obscene number of smaller fragments littering orbit. But the sheer scale of the problem was daunting and a full cleanup would probably take quite some time.<p>

"Thank you Marks" Landry spoke up as Marks finished his report with a quick recap on their own situation, a nod allowing the other to sit back down at the crowded table. By some miracle, no-one had been killed in their engagement with the Covenant fleet, but they hadn't exactly gotten off scot free either. One F-302 had been destroyed outright, two more useful only to be stripped for spare parts and another half a dozen damaged to the point that it would take anything between a few days and a few weeks to repair them - to say nothing of the depletion in their munitions stores and the cost in their limited spare parts to do so ... and it wasn't exactly likely they would be getting a new shipment of either anytime soon.

Still, he knew it could have been worse. _Much _worse.

"Moving on" Landry continued as he worked down the meeting agenda on his tablet, taking a sip from his mug and sighing mentally as he wondered how the US Military could spend over ten _Billion_ Dollars on this ship and _still _manage to screw up the Coffee Machine. "Colonel Carter?"

"My team's primary work has been, per your orders General, to look at what we can offer the UNSC to offset their deficiencies against the Covenants superior technology" Carter joined the conversation with a glance around the packed room. "Here we do have some good news; even six days ago while we could have offered the UNSC some technological samples and expertise, it wouldn't have been enough to let them jump into a genuine program to clone the technology without years of work - any more than say giving an F-302 and some raw materials to another country on Earth would let them duplicate the technology. All _that _knowledge, the scientific and engineering data, is back at Area-51. But thanks to the Asgard, it looks like that won't actually be a major issue ".

"The Asgard core Thor had installed on our ship at their homeworld contains more than just the Asgard's history" Daniel Jackson joined the conversation now, his own time having been spent trying to go through the vast database and get a rough idea of its contents with Valla - and if the shadows under his eyes were any indicator he had remained hard at it through the ship's sleep cycle against his orders, something he made a note to talk to Mitchell about. "As far as I can determine, it holds a complete record of their entire technological knowledgebase. Not to mention" he added, "equally extensive files on Goa'uld and Ancient technology - and it looks like a lot more we haven't uncovered yet on many other species".

"Given that, and considering the situation" Carter retook control of the conversation, "my initial recommendation is that we use Goa'uld technology as the base choice to present to the UNSC" Carter continued, pressing several buttons on the tablet sitting on the desk in front of her, which caused a number of what Landry assumed to be engineering schematics to flash across the screen at the front of the room, Goa'uld, English and Asgard markings flashing across them far too fast for him to translate as they flowed on and off the screen. "Goa'uld technology is the logical starting point for a society with the UNSC's technological base - most of it ultimately was reverse engineered from other more advanced species like the Ancients and broken down to the most 'basic' implementation of the underlying technology -relatively speaking of course".

"So we're giving them Space AK-47's?" Colonel Mitchell asked from his position further down the table.

"More or less" Valla put in from her position next to Daniel down the other end with a slight shrug. "The Goa'uld designed most of their technology for the use of the Jaffa who they led to believe it was all their Gods magic. It needed to be functional, rugged and simple to use because they wouldn't have any ability to repair it in the field - and really, any sign that it wasn't magic but simply advanced technology and the game would have been up. Hence why their more potent technology required Naquadah in someone's bloodstream to make work as a safeguard".

"And this 'keep it simple' approach also flows through to reverse engineering it" Carter took back the conversation. "I've been heavily involved in retro-engineering Goa'uld technology over the Stargate program, and between those lessons and the wealth of information in the core, I'm confident that we can guide the UNSC through developing their own versions of the technology ... if we can get past a couple of key problems".

"Such as?" Landry asked, leaning forward and suppressing his sigh. There was _always _the 'if...' or 'but...' in these meetings.

"Well Sir, simply put, there doesn't appear to be any significant concentrations of Naquadah or Trinium in this universe. Or if there are, neither the UNSC nor Covenant is using them. The sensors show a complete lack of either Trinium or Naquadah signatures in the hulls of the ships we've seen, and not even trace amounts of either on any of these systems planets. Which is actually very interesting given that in _our _universe the planet these people call Reach and we designated P3X-331 held an abandoned Goa'uld mining outpost with trace Naquadah amounts still present. Which would appear to lend

weight to the theory that the Ancients used the Dakara device not just to re-seed life, but also alter the makeup of the planetary crusts to cause deposits to form on planets connected to the Stargate network. Excepting on Earth of course, where they didn't allow the wave to pass through. Which further suggests that-

"Colonel, as fascinating as Ancient history is; bottom line this for me" Landry broke in quickly. Give the good Colonel even an inch of a tangent on any subject â€|

"Sir. Bottom line" Carter exhaled, "is if there are no native sources of Trinium and Naquadah, we're going to have major problems developing this technology base locally. We can get around a lack of trinium, mostly. It just means we're going to have to build bigger, heavier and bulkier, depending on what materials the locals have available. But Naquadah ... " she shook her head.

"So, no Naquadah Reactors?"

"No, but that's not the biggest problem" she said, a somewhat unhappy expression passing across her face. "Power we can probably deal with, the UNSC seems to use quite advanced fusion reactor technology. While they don't appear to be even close to Naquadah reactors energy output on a per volume basis, they build them big enough that we can probably get close enough to what we'll need. The real problem is that most of the technology the UNSC will want are dependent in some way on refined Naquadahs somewhat unique property as a room temperature superconductor. Unless the UNSC have developed their own RTS' I just can't say right now if it's going to be possible to develop working prototypes - let alone practical units suited for field use".

"So, obvious next question from that" Landry asked. "How much Naquadah do we have on board in a usable form?"

"Enough to make some progress" Carter replied in a slightly more optimistic tone, scrolling through her notes briefly. "The good news is that most of what we do have is weapons grade material, the most pure and highly refined grade that exists. Take out the Naquadah in two Mark Eight Warheads and you would have just about enough material for the critical parts of a Hyperdrive for a UNSC Destroyer".

"At the cost of losing our nukes" Mitchell winced slightly.

"We don't exactly have many other sources of refined Naquadah on board that are not critical to the ships functions or used in structural materials or hull plating" Carter shrugged slightly. "The main and secondary reactors could be installed in UNSC ships, of course, but removing them would compromise ship systems until we could rebuild the power systems from the ground up to draw entirely off the ships ZPM. Which I really wouldn't want to do without the support of Area-51 and people who know the systems in depth" she warned in case anyone thought it was a good idea. "We also have fifty Zat's and four Staff Weapons on board, all of which use a Liquid Naquadah power cell of even higher energy density - but they can be a little ... tricky to work with".

"Define 'Tricky' " Landry raised an eyebrow.

"Simply put, Liquid Naquadah tends to want to, well, blow up

whenever you try to draw power from it" Carter replied, surprising Landry with her refreshing bluntness. "Zats and Staff Weapons use some of the energy draw to project a modulated dampening field that controls the power transfer to the capacitors, preventing the reaction from chaining out of control. But the more energy you try to pull, the harder it gets to maintain a steady flow. It's ideal as a long term power supply for Goa'uld technology without a large energy draw, like a Staff Weapon or Hand Device. _Or_ if you want to convert all that Naquadah into useable energy for a single massive surge of power into systems that can handle it - like that energy module Colonel O'Neill built that let us connect to the Asgard gate outside our Galaxy. But once the power draw rises above a certain level you either have to have some way to use all that power all at once productively, or..."

"Boom?" Cameron Mitchell elaborated on her shrug.

Carter nodded. "And given that the 'boom' would be on the scale of a mid scale strategic nuclear weapon, it's ... not something we've been keen to experiment with on Earth".

"So noted. Anything else?" Landry asked as he put down his coffee mug, once again trying not to wince at the taste as he made a mental note to try and get something better from the UNSC in the negotiations. It was truly intolerable sludge, but it was sludge loaded with double the caffeine civilian coffee contained. So he forced it down.

"Potentially, Yes Sir. The Asgard installed what I'm calling a Synthesiser with the rest of their hardware. Honestly, I can't make heads or tails of the technology. But in _theory_, this system can 'build' almost anything you want from the atomic level on up in a virtual environment, then materialize it using a variation on the Asgard beaming system. The downside to this is that there is a correlative energy cost if it can't just dematerialize raw materials you provide it and has to actually create matter from raw energy - we'd lose a _lot_ more energy than we would get out of making a block of Naquadah for example - and I mean a lot. Granted, it's nothing next to the kind of power the ZPM holds, but as there is a good chance we'll need massive amounts of energy to breach the dimensional barrier and get home given that it took a planetary scale explosion to make it happen originally, I'd advise conserving the ZPM as much as possible".

"And there is always the risk when playing around with that much power and plugging it into systems that weren't designed for it that we'll take most of the Solar System with us in the time it takes to say 'opps!' if we get something wrong" Valla put in helpfully.

"Well put" Landry replied to the other dryly. "So leaving out any use of the ZPM and assuming the UNSC does not have materials we can substitute, what can I offer them Colonel?"

"Conservatively and with all the core materials fabricated by us - I'd estimate we would be able to put together something on the order of thirty shield generators or hyperdrives capable of being mounted to the UNSC's Frigate or Destroyer sized ships" Carter replied after a moments thought. "Any larger and the energy cost to generate shields or a big enough Hyperspace window would be too much for the UNSC's fusion reactors, any smaller and the ship probably wouldn't

have the bulk to fit the technology without making major sacrifices in capability. Oh, and based on the scans I took of the Petty Officers armour technology, the UNSC has a quite mature crystal computer technology base that appears broadly comparable to that the Goa'uld used, meaning basic subspace based communications and sensor technology is also on the table. Perhaps inertial manipulation technology as well".

"It's a start" Landry reflected, trying to stay optimistic even if he wasn't sure it was anything _like_ enough to tilt the balance in a war that was so far in the Covenants favour. "From what James implied, the UNSC lacks any kind of FTL communications outside dedicated courier ships. Subspace communications could give them a major strategic boost over what they have right now".

"And if we can adapt the inertial dampening technology for their use, it could give them a big tactical edge" Mitchell added, reverting to type in full Fighter Pilot mode. "Give their Captial ships the speed and agility to engage and disengage on their own terms, let them reposition and exploit those massive spinal railguns of theirs. Might even let them dodge those plasma torpedos ... at the least, let them take the initiative rather than just swamp them with massed firepower while eating enemy fire".

"One step at a time" Landry shook his head slightly as he leaned forward and tapped his pen on the desk, a signal to his people not to get too enthusiastic or promise too much to the UNSC that they might not be able to deliver on. Gods knows they were desperate for anything and everything, but it remained to be seen if they could actually give them enough to even up the battle. "For now, let's talk about the security arrangements for the meeting. Teal'c?"

****0825 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>UNSC **_Pillar of Autumn_**, Epsilon Eridani System****

Jacob Keyes didn't _get _his ships Wardroom.

Three decks above the bridge, the wardroom was similar in design to that on the _Iroquois_, the ship he had captained for six years before being transferred with just about all of his crew to the _Autumn_ for Operation RED FLAG. It was quite a bit larger though, as even if the _Autumn_ was on the small side for a Cruiser, she _was _still a Cruiser and had a lot more space to play with. One of the newer additions to the room courtesy of the ships recent ONI retrofit was the partitioning off of the forward third of the room into a secure conference room, a single long wall of glass creating an enclosed, soundproofed area in which a table with a dozen chairs around it had been installed.

While it looked normal right now, the glass was actually the latest in 'smart glass' technology just starting to be rolled out back on Earth, able to be made perfectly opaque for security purposes as easily as it could project holographic 2D displays on either side of the wall; a feature he had been told had been 'tested' thoroughly by the dockyard workers during lunch breaks at the Aszod yards by watching ultra-definition GravBall broadcasts during the ships retrofit. Besides the conference room itself, the wardroom was open with numerous free standing tables down both other walls which Officers

would mingle around in normal times while off duty, with the Captains dining room off to the port side through a set of double wooden doors.
>It was all extremely impressive, smelling of new paint and new carpet...<p>

But there was no starfield.

There was no bulkhead window for the officers to stand at and enjoy a spectacular view over a good quality scotch as tradition demanded there be, as there had been in _every_ ward room he had been in over his many years of service. Yet his bridge for some bizarre reason had been lavishly decked out with floor to ceiling windows all over the damn place, framing a perfect target for any hostile fighter that got inside the ships point defence envelope.

It mystified Keyes why the designers of the _Halcyon_ class had come to the conclusion that the ships command centre needed _less_ protection than the officers 'casual Friday get together' location, but even more confusing to him was the question of how his command had made it through two ship wide refits in her lifetime without having _anyone_ taking a note of the blatant design flaw and _fixing_ it.

Still, he smiled slightly to himself; _Captain_ Keyes might not have been able to get the yard dogs to do anything to fix the problem, but _Admiral_ Keyes-

"You're doing it again" a voice broke into his train of thought.

"Doing what?" he replied easily, turning slightly in his chair to fix the only other person in the room with a questioning glance.

"Smiling, as you consider how you can use that new star on your shoulder and all the awesome authority that comes with it, to make things change the way you _want_ them to change" Catherine Halsey replied without bothering to even look up from the laptop she was working on as her fingers flew across the keyboard with a persistent clattering.

"And so what if I am?" he asked in mild amusement. "Doesn't rank have its privileges?"

Now she _did_ look up from under her glasses across the table at him, her look curiously introspective for the woman he had known for so many years ... yet still barely knew at all in some ways.

"True... although in my experience, the privileges gained are never quite equal to the new burdens that come knocking on your door after a promotion. At least at _this_ level".

"Is that why you spend so much of your life these days hiding underground instead of taking that corner office at the top of Olympic Tower the Fleet keeps offering you?"

"Only in part" she agreed after a moment, but Keyes caught briefest expression of surprise that flickered in her eyes at the fact that he had heard about her shunning an office 99% of the fleets officers

would _kill_ for, before she turned her focus back to the computer she had been working on. "Although between you and me, I _will_ admit that staying buried where I can focus on my work in peace, without every second graduate student ONI recruits cknocking on my door looking for help _is_ a definite perk of my position in ONI".

"Well you _are_ the Chief Scientist" he pointed out dryly before he frowned as she kept working at her computer with a focus he had rarely seen. "What _are_ you working on so furiously?"

She didn't look up from the keyboard as she continued to type away.

"If you must know Jacob, I am trying to find a piece of string".

Keyes didn't know what to say to _that_ cryptic response, except to appreciate that Catherine clearly wasn't going to tell him what she was doing. Luckily, the possibility of an extended and awkward silence between them was eliminated as the blast door into the wardroom opened. Swivelling his chair around, he the pair of Marines he had posted outside snapping salutes to a group of figures moving swiftly into the room and taking his cue from them he made his way to the double glass doors into the conference room, subtly double checking his newly issued Admirals uniform was in order as he did in the reflection. Satisfied, he squared his shoulders and pushed the door open, stepping outside and snapping a salute to the trio of Admirals as they walked past him, before dutifully returning the salutes of the two towering NCO's in trail before he followed them inside - the doors and walls opaquing to a misty white even before they had fully closed.

"Let's get down to business" Terrance Hood declared without ceremony as he took his place at the table, Admirals Whitcomb and Stanforth claiming the seats flanking him. Keyes returned to his own seat opposite the Chief of Naval Operations. Dr Halsey remained seated on his left at the far end of the table and Spartans 117 and 005 took the seats next to him towards her, spreading out a little to give each other some more leg room. Outside a combat zone and reporting to a meeting with the most senior people in the UNSC, the two commandos had eschewed their power armour for standard issue Naval duty uniforms displaying only their rank and name/number combination ... but even so, they still seemed to physically _dominate_ the space, looking far too big for the chairs they occupied and making the room seem far more crowded then it was.

"The meeting on board the _Odyssey_ will take place in less than three hours" Hood continued, drawing Keyes attention back away from the commandos as he settled into his own chair, his presence far less physical but none the less equally dominating of the room. "So let's get down to it quickly. We need to lay out clearly what the UNSC's position is vis-À-vis the _Odyssey_ before I enter into direct talks with them - but before that, we need to get some housekeeping done".

"Sir" Whitcomb spoke up almost at once. "Even before we move forward with the planning, there is something we need to work out first". Getting a nod from the CNO, he squared his shoulders in the way all subordinate officers did when trying to speak an unpleasant truth to higher authority who probably didn't want to hear it, but to his

credit he didn't flinch away either. "With all due respect Sir, you shouldn't be going on this meeting. I think these people are on the level â€" Gods I hope they are on the level- but we cannot risk yourself, the head of ONI and your deputy at the same time. It's an unacceptable and unnecessary risk given Earths strategic situation".

"I concur Sir" the -acting- ONI Head chimed in - quite predictably Keyes thought â€" but polished enough that it was very clear both Admirals had agreed to this joint approach before the meeting. For that matter so did he, but as he was two stars short of joining this conversation, he just kept his mouth shut as the spymaster continued. "If this meeting goes smoothly, we might will be able to move towards a visit in the future â€" in the short term we can extend a formal invitation for a delegation to visit the 'Autumn or Reach itself, where we control the situation and the risks â€" but we simply cannot risk both of us and you going into this".

"I agree" Hood said, to the surprise of everyone until the table before he continued without missing a beat. "Which is also why neither of you will be accompanying me on board the Odyssey today".

"I ... don't think that was quite what Dan meant" Admiral Stanforth replied with an even tone that none the less said volumes for his level of objection to this idea. "With all due respect, Sir, you're far too valuable to the UNSC to risk on a first contact mission like this".

The other shook his head. "On the contrary Admiral, I have to be there. Everyone in this room" he said, sweeping his gaze around it as he spoke, "is aware of the strategic situation - the real situation, not the spin that Section Two puts out. The hard truth Gentlemen, Doctor, is that until the Odyssey intervened, we were on the ropes. "RED FLAG" and he paused to nod an acknowledgement at the Spartans sitting at the table, "was our last best hope to force a negotiated peace, but everyone around this table knew it was a long shot â€" albeit one that was well worth taking and the same is true here. Now. The Odyssey inflicted more kills in a single engagement with the enemy than the UNSC fleet managed in the last two years - and she did so almost contemptuously for the enemies abilities. That is what we stand to gain if we approach this correctly, and regardless of risk, we need to do everything that improves our chances to make this work" he continued, his tone acquiring the slightest edge that stated that he had made up his mind on this. "And if that includes me going so I can negotiate directly with them from the outset, then that's what I will do. If I am going to send people on what might have amounted to a suicide mission because they were the only ones who might have pulled it off" he again glanced at the Spartans sitting opposite him, "then I damn well not going to back away from doing what I need to do, if I am the only one who can. End of discussion".

Wisely, his two immediate subordinates, although looking entirely unhappy with his decision, heard the tone in the CNOs voice and just nodded their acceptance.

"Now" Hood continued, moving forward briskly, "we can't afford to sit still and wait to see how this plays out - not with the Covenant on Earths doorstep. Despite their losses, we have no choice but to

assume that they will be back and back soon. So while I'm going to be busy negotiating with these people and making this alliance work, the rest of you need to carry on with everything else that's going on. Admiral Stanforth; you're going back to Earth to take charge as soon as the Luna Eclipse finishes her maintenance - at least until Admiral Harper gets back from his Outer Colonies inspection tour. Keep the reinforcement going until the Orbital Defence Grid has been fully deployed, then I want you to send Battlegroups Stalingrad, Los Angeles and Seoul to Reach to beef up the defence. Harper is bringing the third fleet back with him, they can reinforce the Home Fleet back up to full strength on arrival. I'll have orders cut after this meeting".

The ONI spymaster nodded, not bothering to point out the irony of the head of ONI being put in charge of the UNSC when the entire organization had been purged at the highest level only months ago thanks to Margaret Parangosky probably working quietly to do just that - minus the lawful invitation to do so of course.

"Dan" the CNO continued, glancing at the powerful looking man to his right, "you're in charge of the local situation. But before anything else, get everything ONI and FLEETCOM have on the critical list left off world within twenty four hours. We're going to have to consolidate everything in Sol for now, we can work out a better plan after all the assets are clear".

"There isn't really much left on Reach - at least from an ONI perspective" Stanforth assured the other with a quick study of several status reports on his computer. "All the personnel from CASTLE and SWORD bases were evacuated with their data - and most key hardware - as soon as the Covenant presence in force was confirmed. But it can't hurt to do a double check of the ONI sites. If we have the time, there is a lot of very valuable heavy hardware that we need to recover and ship back to Earth - as soon as we figure out where we can re-consolidate the R&D section".

"Make it happen" Hood agreed with a look at his deputy, who nodded and made a note on his own personal computer. "Next" he continued, "I want any warship that needs extensive yard time but has a working slipspace drive on its way to Earth ASAP, as soon its conducted the minimum necessary repairs. The same for any new construction that can be made slipspace capable quickly, we can finish them in the Sol yards".

"What about Reach itself?" Whitcomb finally brought up the elephant in the room. "We can hardly evacuate the planet - but it won't be long before we're going to get everyone down there demanding a one way ticket as far away from Reach as possible before the Covenant return. And once they see we are stripping everything valuable from the planet..."

"In the short term, we put out the fires " Hood sighed tiredly, his expression suggesting he wasn't at all happy with the decision but didn't have much of a choice. "But you're right, there just isn't any way we can evacuate close to a billion people. And, as cold as it sounds, we can't afford to let them leave either. The Covenant can't have finished with Reach yet, they'll be back. And Reach is the gateway to Earth. So we have no choice, we have to hold the line, buy enough time to rebuild the fleet with the technology the Odyssey is bringing to the table. In order to do that, we need

the fleet yards, we need the factories and we need the workers to make it all happen".

"It could cause issues with the locals if we try to force people to stay" Stanforth warned bluntly, the dark memories of the decades long Insurrection by colonies against Earth and the UNSC hanging over the room unbidden at his warning. Reach had never been a part of that, minus a handful of external attacks by cells inserted onto the planet ... but a fleet of Covenant CCS class Warships could do wonders for turning the public against the Government, should it appear that said Government couldn't either protect them or get them out of here. "We can play with the PR angle, but it would be a huge help if we could go public with the Odyssey..."

"No, not yet" Hood flatly ordered. "Not until we have this in the bag. For now, focus efforts on damage limitation on the ground. We can keep orbital space locked down for at least a few days entirely for cleanup reasons so that should prevent any immediate exodus - and most people who had a way to leave the system already did as far as I can see".

"There are already rumours running around orbit, everyone in the fleet saw what happened" Keyes spoke up for the first time, gaining the attention of all present and managing to not visibly flinch as the constellation of stars in the room turned to focus their attention on him. But he did have his ear much closer to the Captains and Commanders whom he had been part of barely a few days ago than these people. "The local fleet grapevine isn't talking about much else. And in the absence of any kind of official commentary on it, the chatter is only getting louder".

"The people over on that ship were at least canny enough to only transmit real data to use via an encrypted ONI datastream" Whitcomb grunted with a glance at James, whose suits COM unit had transmitted the burst in question. "So who they are is at least still dark. Keyes, what are the main rumours going around the fleet about the Odyssey?"

"Primarily that she is the end result of some kind of super secret project in the Sol Ort cloud that ONI has been working on for the last decade" Keyes spoke up promptly - and not missing the brief look that passed between the three Admirals either ... one that wasn't a look of confusion. He filed that away for later. "Although there has been some suggestion that she's something the insurrectionists came up with and that you, Sir" he nodded at Hood, "have arrived to negotiate formal independence for most of the surviving outer colonies in exchange for this technology".

"Well I can squish that rumour easily enough" Stanforth assured Hood with a slight smirk. "I'll work up a dispatch for the fleet on the military side, and organize a press conference by some Section 2 staff on the civilian side. I've already got AI scrubbers going through ReachNET and FLEETCOM who will alert us if there is any leak of the Odyssey on the Civilian side".

"Keep on top of it" Hood ordered, getting a nod back. "The last thing we need is for the damn newsies trying to fly up to the Odyssey for an exclusive. Now as for the Odyssey herself, I'll be going over alone, but I will take along a security detail-"

"With respect Terrance, I need to be on that ship with you" Doctor Halsey joined the conversation for the first time from the far end of the table, causing everyone to turn to face her - Keyes noting with mild amusement that she had clearly finished whatever work she had been doing on her computer at last, but had no doubt kept complete track of the conversation.

"We can't risk you Catherine" the other said flatly as he shook his head. "The UNSC can survive my loss, I'm honestly not sure if can survive yours if something goes wrong".

"Terrance, the same logic you applied to your own presence applies such as much to me" the other countered smoothly, her tone not challenging but almost clinical, as if she was laying out a scientific proof for everyone. "If they are going to take us seriously in negotiating for their technology and our help in finding a way home, we need to be able to present someone who can speak for the UNSC on the scientific side of things. Based on my review of James' mission log, this Samantha Carter" she said, tapping a button that materialized a window on the glass wall behind her, a picture of the woman in question isolated from the Spartans mission recorder, "is clearly not just a key scientific person in their entire organization, but she is also a key member of the command staff that answers to this General Landry. Her appraisal of the situation, of how helpful we can be to them, that will almost certainly define his response to us as much as your negotiations will".

Hood stared at her levelly for a time, but as ever Keyes noted, her logic was annoyingly impeccable.

"It's against my better judgement, but you do have a good point" he finally replied - grudgingly. "Very well, you're with me. Master Chief?"

"Sir?" the most senior of the Spartans answered at once, straightening -somehow, despite the fact that he had been all but sitting at attention this whole meeting - at the question.

"You are assigned as the close detail protection for me" he ordered. "Petty Officer" he glanced at the other Spartan in the line, that of James-058" you will stick with Doctor Halsey. The Odyssey crew know you and seem to have afforded you a measure of trust from your excellent first impression, so let's keep that rolling".

"Aye Aye Sir" the senior Spartan answered on behalf of his team.

"Sidearms only gentlemen" he added a moment later. "But in armour. A two man detail for me and Doctor Halsey shouldn't appear threatening".

"It still leaves you with no backup except the response team on the 'Autumn'" Stanforth pointed out with a grimace on his face, clearly still unhappy about Hood going over at all, let alone with so little protection compared to the typical layers of security wrapped around the man as suited his station. "You should at least take a fast response squad with you. Even if you leave them on the Pelican. Just in case".

"I don't want to do anything that might look overly aggressive" Hood

shook his head slightly. "Many more people than a bodyguard each for Catherine and I, and this starts to look less like an escort and more and more like a Commando unit being sent in to try and take their ship. If I was in their shoes, I know _I'd _be wary about some kind of Trojan Horse assault".

"A compromise?" Halsey again broke in. "Another group of Spartans in powered assault armour may seem threatening - especially if they took a good look at James suit and got an idea of the capabilities of his suit, but what about two Spartan _pilots_ dressed in SPI armour flying the Pellican?"

"Sneaky" Stanforth replied approvingly as only a spy could as he turned back to the CNO. "The two could easily pass for pilots, but it would put two Spartans in stealth armour close to you. Give us an ace in the hole if things turn nasty".

Hood considered it for a moment, then nodded.

"Very well, Master Chief, pick two Spartans and assign them to the team once we're done here".

"Yes Sir".

"Now" Hood continued, "moving on to the main thrust of what _we_ can offer _them_, Doctor Halsey you had a number of observations to make?"

**Ninth Age of Reclamation, Steps of Silence \
>Covenant Holy City "High Charity".
War Chamber of the Imperial Admiral of the Sangheili.**

It had been a long time since Thel 'Vadamee had seen Xytan 'Jar Wattinree in the flesh.

Too long perhaps. Because as the figure sitting on the command throne in front of a ten-span wide holographic map of the Galaxy stood inside the darkened room, the new Arbiter of the Covenant was taken aback by the sheer _size _of the warrior.

A head again as tall as he and wearing armour styled very similar to his that he had also been gifted by the Hierarchs, the most senior military commander in all the Sangheili cut a figure like no other in the Covenant. His title, an ancient one stretching back into even pre-Covenant history signified that he was considered the greatest warrior in a society where advancement was almost entirely tied-in with military prowess ... and he moved with a presence that said, without saying, that he _knew _this to be true.

Simply put, Xytan 'Jar Wattinree was the perfect Sangheili. So much so that it had been whispered that the younger Sangheili had started to worship _him _more than the Prophets themselves as his list of victories against the greatest enemy the Covenant had ever faced grew and grew. Vadamee did not know the truth of that, but the fact that the Imperial Admiral had been suddenly rotated off the front lines of the war with the humans to command of the Combined Fleet of Righteous Purpose spoke credence to them. While the Hierarchs had presented it as a promotion for it had put him in command of twice as many ships as he had ever commanded and granted him the solemn duty of protecting the vast expanses of Covenant space, most suspected it was

simply an expedient way of removing a potential political threat and maintain the delicate balance of power between the two founding members of the Covenant.

And for all his skill on the battlefield, Wattinree was no politician. And while his singular ruthlessness and skill had won him popularity with the masses, it had made him few friends among the Sangheili Councillors who may have been able to fight the decision.

"Thel 'Vadamee" the titan spoke in a soft rumble that was as much felt as heard. "It has been a long time".

The last time Vadamee had seen this one had been as a newly promoted Squadron Master; one of the sub-group commanders in the Fleet of Particular Justice with a dozen ships under his leadership. He had watched as Wattinree had formally turned control of the fleet over to the Prophets chosen replacement, a Zealot fanatic Tano 'Inanraree.

>The fact that he in turn had been trusted with that same fleet after 'Inanraree had been promoted to lead the Honour Guard flotilla around High Charity and had just _lost_ it, was something very much in the forefront of the Arbiter's mind right now.

"Thel 'Vadamee is dead" he replied, the ritual words expected of any who addressed him by name outside of his most direct family line. "I am the Arbiter, the Sword of the Prophets".

"Indeed?" the other replied. "Yet here you stand, _Arbiter_, alive when a great many others you were sworn to lead are not".

"This is so" he answered, resisting the urge to reach for the hilt of his Energy Sword on his belt as the other slowly closed the distance with an implacable, overwhelming gait, as if the mountain had decided to move closer to the molehill.

"Why?" the other asked bluntly. "You could have died with your fleet, died with honour and in glory against a worthy foe. Yet you left them, returned to High Charity where all that could possibly await you would be the exchange of a clean death for a most ... _unpleasant_ one - with the addition of forfeiting your honour and that of your line".

"It was necessary" 'Vadamee replied levelly. "I needed to report to the Council what had happened-"

"Arbiter" the other cut in calmly ... but with inflections put into that single word that came through _very_ clearly that didn't quite mock his reply. "You could have sent any one of your subordinates in your place" Wattinree pointed, a trick of the lighting making it look like the other was striding across the Galaxy itself towards him and only making the finest warrior of the Sangheili look all the more intimidating. "You could have revealed the presence of the Prophetess before Truth forced you to, you could have launched in a fighter and challenged the humans to single combat while sending your fleet in your place. So tell me Arbiter, truthfully; _why_ _did_ you come back and why are you so determined to take the blame for a fiasco not of your making?"

Vadamee held the others hidden gaze for several long moments, trying

to determine what the other wanted from him, the other weighing him back just as silently before he finally spoke.

"The Council needed to be made to understand the true threat" he said with atypical bluntness. "Many are those who would have sought to replace me, sought to take vengeance and wash out the stain of our defeat with the blood of the humans. They would have attacked in a rage, throwing another fleet against them without the respect due for a now far more dangerous foe. And in their destruction, my shame would be compounded. My returning alive in shame was the shock needed to get the Councils attention and make them consider the threat clearly".

"Hmm" the other rumbled, neither accepting nor rejecting his statement. "And the High Prophetess of Obligation?"

"I gave her my oath of silence" Vadamee growled, his tone a warning to the other to not push him on this. "It bound me, even in shame, even when it was the cause of my shame. It was my higher oath to the Covenant and the Hierarchs when directly questioned that brought yet more shame down on me by breaking my oath to her. Regardless of her orders or her position, ultimately, the Fleet of Particular Justice was _my _command. As was the responsibility for all those lost".

The other stared silently for a time, before finally turning away side and ordering the room to bring the illumination up to normal.

"Curious indeed that for one who apparently forsook his honour by fleeing from combat, you have only sought to act at all times to preserve the honour and reputation of all those around you who are far more to blame" the other observed. "Room; illumination four points"

A soft chime sounded and the construct that monitored the towers in this part of High Charity obediently activated the lights, the glow slowly rising to banish the shadows, fully illuminating the Imperial Admiral in all his glory.

It did nothing to make him seem any less intimidating or glorious as the others eyes cut his soul, weighing and judging him - and Vadamee held that gaze without flinching. Apparently finding what he was looking for, Xytan 'Jar Wattinree nodded once and turned away walking back to the Galaxy map and signalling with a brief hand battle gesture, signaled for him to fall in.

"Did you know Arbiter that in the ancient days before the Prophets landed on our world, some of the highest praise in our culture was reserved for those warriors who lost a battle, but through skill and leadership were able to limit those losses and retreat from the field of battle, to survive and return in the knowledge that there would be another day?"

Vadamee blinked, once.

"I did not" he replied slowly, struck somewhat off balance by the question that seemed to be treading on the verge of heresy. "Especially given the current Code of Honour we are taught".

"Yes, it is a curious change in our culture" the Admiral rumbled his

agreement. "When I was reassigned to guard the frontiers of our space, I found myself with time to study the ancient histories of our world, looking to the guidance and wisdom of the ancient ones for clues as to why I had been banished. It was a somewhat difficult task - few clues remain easily accessible from that time".

"Much was destroyed in the great war with the Prophets" Vadamee acknowledged as he tried to grasp where this conversation was going - knowing only that the other was testing him, seeking _something _in him. "Much of our current culture was forged in that conflict - and with the Writ of Union in the immediate aftermath".

"Indeed" the other said with an approving tone in his voice at his clear understanding of the time. "And yet I had the privileges and the time to walk the old battlefields, to see with my own eyes the scars across Sanghelios. My Rank allowed me unquestioned entry to some of the most ancient temples on our world that contained the few remaining records of the time before the Covenant - perhaps the first Imperial Admiral to have bothered in centuries. And so I meditated on the wisdom of those who came before us, read the surviving accounts of the war between our people and the San 'Shyuum - and do you know what I found?"

Thel's very well honed combat senses were informing him quite loudly that he was on the very edge of a dangerous situation, although he still could not see the danger. Words had never been his weapon of choice - neither had it been so for the Admiral waiting for his answer, and yet here he was asking about his opinion on words on a page...

Words on a page...

"You found words on a page" he answered, "not wisdom".

The other stared at him for a long and painful moment ... then nodded, sharply with an approving flex of his mandibles.

"Well said Arbiter" the other chuckled with a rumble. "You are correct Arbiter; wisdom can only come from the universe around us. We gain it by experiencing its wonders and terrors and, presuming we survive them, we gain wisdom. I gained little wisdom from the dusty scrolls and ancient data cubes, but I could see that the ancients _had _wisdom none the less - and that was enough. I studied the ancient arguments as our fleets were pushed back and our situation became yet more grim by the day, between those who sought to use the technology of the Gods to even the battle and those who refused to even consider such an idea until the orthodoxy was correctly overthrown for expediency. I read of warriors who suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the San 'Shyuum's Forerunner ship, yet were praised for fighting to conserve as many of their ships as possible in a hopeless battle while hurting the enemy and their lesser forces where they could".

"I have never heard those stories" Thel replied, feeling a fascination at this insight into history. He was hardly so blind as to not see the parallels the Admiral was drawing with his own situation - even the parallel between the humans new warship and their existing fleet compared to the Prophets use of the Forerunners ship- but more interesting to him was the fact that these great battles in a time that had defined everything about his people were

all but unknown.

"Few have" the Admiral noted. "All we teach our young are the grand stories of my worthy predecessor, the Imperial Admiral who in his final battle refused to be pushed aside, advancing until he had spent all but his last two ships to win the victory that cost the San 'Shyuum's so greatly that the blindness was lifted from our eyes together, and our Covenant was forged. That the Great One even had a fleet to lead into that glorious battle was entirely due to those who had fought so skilfully to conserve their ships ... and yet this truth has been all but forgotten. A curiosity, would you not say?'

Vadamee felt something he did not quite like stirring at those words. An uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty as all he had been taught about how a warrior of the Covenant - of the Sangheili - fought clashed against the words of the greatest of them all - and the far greater force of history itself behind them.

"Why have you asked for my presence?" he asked finally, feeling lost in the revelations being thrown at him and trying to push past the sudden feeling that one of the foundations of his beliefs had been casually eroded.

"Because you hold what I seek Arbiter" the Admiral replied, looking down upon him and transfixing him with an incredibly hungry gaze, like a predator studying its prey. "Wisdom. Forged in the crucible of the humans terrible new power and fire of the Council Chamber both - yet you survive". With a simple wave of his massively powerful hands, the Galaxy map faded and a new holographic picture took shape, one he recognized instantly as the system the humans called Epsilon Eridani, before focusing it in on the planet that was the site of his shame, the orb hovering in the centre of the giant holotank with the moon named Csodaszarvas materializing directly in front of them. Another wave of the Admirals hands and icons and labels, by the hundreds, materialized into being, with countless other markings of sensor sweeps and navigational paths flooding the space between the two. Even from a brief glance, he could recognize this was early in the campaign against the planet, with only the few tiny dots of the Stealth corvette teams the Prophetess had deployed visible, frozen in the motions of carefully picking their way through the humans patrols and defences to deposit their Zealot vanguard teams.

"There are facets to this battle that are unclear. Politics, tactics, strategy - both on our side and their side. I have a great many questions Arbiter, and before you leave here today, I intend to find the wisdom to answer them"

****1055 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Pelican Echo 419, Epsilon Eridani System

'_You're passing the final waypoint Echo Four One Niner, time to target is ninety seconds. Knife One and Knife two are breaking formation. Godspeed_'.
'_Copy all Knife One, Four One Niner is clear_'.
The Master Chief Spartan-117 listened attentively to the chatter

between Kelly and one of the two Longswords that had been pacing their ship on the short from 'Autumns starboard hanger bay to the holding point off the bow of the _Odyssey_ - a few hundred kilometres to the rear of the Cruiser. He didn't _need_ to listen in of course, he had complete faith in Kelly and he knew if anything _did_ _need_ his attention, she would let him know.

But listening in on the channel and monitoring the mission status was at least something he could do to keep his mind off the fact that he was nothing more than cargo right now. With the exceptions of James, Li and Kurt, none of the Spartan II's had ever really been at _ease_ working in space - no matter how well trained they were in Zero-G and Vacuum combat. The knowledge that none of your skills were worth anything if an enemy fighter lined up on your six or some point defence cannon suddenly opened fire was highly distracting, but most of the unit had long come up with their own ways to manage it.

None the less, he successfully stifled the urge to pull his sidearm and check it for the fifth time since he had logged the weapon out of the armoury an hour ago, or to stand up and check out the crates that had been bolted in place of several of the troop benches that normally lined the compartment. The largest two crates contained an ample numbers of varied shaped charges designed to cut through warship grade blast doors while the smaller crates held a mixture of small arms that Kelly and Li would break out should everything fall to pieces and a hostile extraction was called for. The rest of his team was geared up and on standby at thirty second scramble readiness along with the _'Autumns_ Longsword complement if called for, but if things _did_ _go_ hostile, he wasn't about to order his people in against a ship that could slaughter even Covenant ships as if they were minor annoyances.

In fact as far as he could see, the only real way out should their hosts turn hostile would be to seize important personnel on the ship as hostages and use them to cover a fallback. Or more likely, use them to delay any assault while the rest of his team used their stealth armour to find and assault the ships engine room and disable it, opening up the way for the rest of his team to force a breach and full scale boarding action.

'_Admiral_' Kellys voice came once again, this time the COM board on his HUD showing that she was broadcasting over the general group channel. "_We are at one minute till the hold point_".

"Very well, tie me in to an open channel on the E-Band".

There was a pause of about a second as Kelly patched his signal through the ships radio. The E-Band was the emergency band, an unencrypted radio frequency used by all UN ships and troops. In the 20th Century it had been known as the GUARD frequency and it had been the channel which the limited communications to date with the _Odyssey_ had taken place on. "You're on Sir".

"Attention, Odyssey" Hood said without preamble. "This is UNSC Pelican Echo Four One Niner, on approach, requesting permission to come aboard".

'_Echo Four One Niner_' a voice came back almost at once, one that he recognized instantly from his hurried mission briefing as belonging to Colonel Cameron Mitchell. "_You are clear to land, please proceed

to the starboard hanger bay, repeat, starboard bay and land at your discretion. Be advised the hanger has an atmospheric shield active and normal gravity - do you require the gravity to be disengaged for landing_?"

"Negative Odyssey" Hood replied. "All understood and proceeding to Starboard hanger. Out". Hood then reached down and with a practiced twist, released his five point harness, standing up even as the ships engines started to spin up as Kelly shifted their course. "I'm going forward to get a look at her as we land".

"Aye Sir" the Chief replied with a slight nod, holding his sigh as he watched the most senior officer in the UNSC fleet getting up and walking around the cabin during landing operations. If Kelly needed to perform evasive manoeuvres without warning right now -

"Is there a problem, John?" a new voice broke into his thoughts.

"No Ma'am, no problem" he replied, turning to face the only civilian on this ship, strapped in on the other side of the troop compartment and looking far too small for the seat designed to hold a fully equipped ODS.

"This isn't a normal mission we would send a Spartan on" Catherine Halsey continued, all without looking up from her tiny laptop as she typed away at great speed, as she had been ever since boarding the craft back on board the Autumn. "But it may well be the most important mission you will undertake in your service with the UNSC".

"Yes Ma'am, I understand" he nodded confidently at her.

"Do you?" she replied levelly, finally looking up and gazing across the bay at him. And despite the fact that he was covered in the most powerful armour ever constructed by human hands and his face was hidden behind an opaque visor, he couldn't help but feel completely exposed under that gaze - as he had since he was a very young child so long ago. "Very well, explain to me the consequences of this mission".

"Ma'am!" he replied, somehow managing to straighten up slightly while strapped into his seat in a full combat manoeuvring rated harness. "The primary objective is to obtain the advanced technology and expertise in developing it that is being used by the _Odyssey. _If we are successful in this, it has the potential to completely change the strategic balance of power".

"Indeed" she replied without a change in her expression. "But what will this mean for the UNSC?"

John paused for a half second to try and consider his response.

"It means a real possibility that humanity will be able to defend itself against the Covenant Ma'am, possibly even defeat them" he finally replied for lack of anything else to say.

"And what if we do win?" she asked him, closing her laptop and granting him her full attention. "Assume that the technology we gain allows the UNSC to beat back the Covenant and render them a non threat, perhaps even defeat them. What happens then?"

"It would mean ... we survived the war. A war of extermination" the Chief replied, now thoroughly confused as to what she was asking him - and not for the first time.

"And what about you and the rest of the Spartan II's?" she asked pointedly. "And the Spartan IIIs? The rest of the fleet have homes, and wives and brothers and families and friends and futures that they are fighting for. But if we won this war, if peace broke out and we had no more need for Spartans ... what would you do with your life then?"

The question struck John like the backhand of an angry Brute - mostly because of the abruptness of it. Peace had been a distant concept to him and his Spartans. He ultimately knew that if they won this war against the Covenant they would have peace, but he wasn't fighting for peace. He was fighting to protect Earth and its Colonies, the people of the UNSC. That was his purpose in life - it was the purpose she had given him ... and without that ...

"You don't have to give me an answer now John" Halsey broke into his crashing thoughts. "But I would like an answer when you figure it out".

"Yes Ma'am" he replied, a tangent of a thought consolidating out of the sheer confusion his thoughts had been thrown into, one which he clung to in an effort to try and impose order on his suddenly confused awareness and his mission. "Ma'am ... on the subject of future plans ... may ... I ask a personal question?"

"You want to know about Miranda" Halsey replied with a level gaze, once again managing to read his mind without any apparent effort and looking completely unsurprised at his nod to her question. The Commander had only been on board the 'Autumn' for a few hours, enough time to apparently catch up with her parents before she and many other officers who had been packed into the Luna Eclipse had been sent out into the fleet to make up key personnel shortages. Commander Keyes had been posted as the new commander of Foundations of Stone, an otherwise combat ready Destroyer whose slated command crew had been killed down on Reach during the initial Covenant offensive when FLEETCOM HQ was blasted. "What about her?"

"Ma'am ... is she the future you are fighting for?"

The other tilted her head slightly in thought as she considered the question ... but was saved from answering as Kelly suddenly cut in over his headset.

'I have the hanger bay doors at six hundred meters opening up, decelerating to sixty KPH'.

At once, John pushed aside all non essential thoughts, dropping into his combat ready, mission ready status with long practice. He now had friendlies to protect and neutrals to watch over in case they turned into hostiles.

Everything else was just window dressing. Which was just fine by him.

"Well, I suppose I should hand off the last member of your team then"

Doctor Halsey added, standing up -again to his minor annoyance- as she carefully stepped across the handful of meters in the bay to him, reaching into her lab coats pocket carefully as she did so. Her hand came back out, and his eyes at once locked on to glowing blue holographic data stream spinning around a circular hole in the middle of a rectangular computer chip, the information visible inside moving far too fast for even his enhanced vision to track...

****1059 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

**>USS Odyssey, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani
System**

Hank Landry watched closely as the olive green spaceship entered the empty hanger bay, a roaring of thrusters penetrating even the thick window overlooking the empty bay as he studied the craft with the practiced eye of a pilot. It was definitely the most 'human' ship he had ever seen that hadn't been built by the SGC; straight forward in both form and function without any of the artistic embellishments typically favoured by races like the Ancients or Goa'uld. Swivelling engine mounts with multiple thrusters mounted worked together to kill the crafts forward velocity under instruction from the Airman manning the flight control station next to him, at which point the craft neatly spun around to face back towards space and settled down onto the deck, precisely in the centre of the hastily marked out square near the front of the hastily emptied hanger bay.

Nodding his thanks to the Airman for the job well done, he left the room quickly and moved to join Daniel Jackson and Samantha Carter, who waiting for him at the service lift just down the corridor that would take them down to the hanger bay. Sam wore her dress blues - as did he - while Daniel had put on a very expensive looking suit that no honest archaeologist - well at least one that didn't earn an obscene amount of combat pay like Daniel Jackson - could possibly afford. As the _Odyssey_ had nominally been on a diplomatic mission to the Asgard when all of this had been set into motion, USAF Regulations had required him and the rest of the crew to bring along their Service Dress and Mess Dress uniforms - no matter how many times he had tried to respectfully remind General Vidrine that the Asgard didn't even _wear_ _clothes_. But it looked like the Pentagon would have the last laugh here, and privately he was glad they had insisted on it. First impressions counted after all, and he didn't want his people to look like slobs in front of their - possible - new allies.

"Report" he ordered as he stepped into the lift the two were holding for him.

"We've secured all key systems and key areas under full lockdown protocols" Carter replied as she stepped in after him followed by Daniel, the lift swiftly dropping down to open onto a service room covered in inspection panels and status displays, with a large red hatch in the floor under which one of the ships secondary Naquadah reactors was positioned to provide local backup power to the hanger bay should the ships primary power be cut off. "The route to the conference room has been cleared and the Marine platoon has been deployed in four reaction teams" Carter continued as she swiped her keycard through the rooms only door and guided everyone out and through the small maze of service passages back to the ships starboard passageway, with the unerring confidence of someone who had

helped design the ship. "Teal'c and SG3 are in the hanger itself on overwatch, so far everything is going like clockwork".

A pair of Marines were waiting for them there, clad in full black coloured combat gear and hefting ominous looking weapons to boot. Landry returned their salute easily as he waved them into the airlock with Colonel Carter and Doctor Jackson, the doors cycling closed behind, the first of the two Marines tilting his head slightly as his earpiece chattered.

"Sirs, we have movement - ramp coming down at the back of the UNSC ship".

"Remember" Landry said as the airlock sealed shut and the airlock adjusted for the small pressure change between the two sections of the ship, "weapons tight unless they make a clearly hostile move against us. Leathal force is the last resort if we do go hot - keep them suppressed and wait for Colonel Mitchell to beam them out of here. Everyone clear?"

"Clear Sir" the Marine answered with a nod on behalf of the rest of the team.

"And for Gods sakes, no '300' jokes at the Spartans if they come along" Daniel added as the doors started to slide open.

****11:01 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Pelican Echo 419, Docked USS Odyssey, Epsilon Eridani System

The feeling like someone had driven a spike of ice into the front of his head was still new enough to the Master Chief to be somewhat disorienting, but it started to fade as his 'house guest' made herself at home.

Inside his head.

It was still a slightly unnerving sensation, yet honestly compelled him to admit that it was also fascinating; the physical sensation of another intelligence fusing with his own. Distinctly separate ... yet paradoxically connected on a level he still didn't truly understand - and he guessed that neither did even Doctor Halsey herself.

Simply put, it was just a new form of teamwork. But it really wasn't simple - at least not to him. This was a kind of existence unlike anything he had ever experienced before; a second intelligence - a second presence sharing his body, working together with him, enhancing him far beyond what he otherwise would be, could be. It wasn't just the vast array of capabilities he gained - there was something deeper, more fundamental that had changed in him when Doctor Halsey had introduced him to his new 'partner' just over a week ago and, at times, it left him almost-

"Are we there yet?" Cortana demanded over his helmet speakers in a slightly miffed tone as she finished 'settling' in.

And just like that, the moment was gone.

"Yes" the Chief replied succinctly as he made a final check of his

weapon, double checking that a round was chambered and the safety was on before he snapped it back onto the molecular holster mounted on his thigh, ready for use in an instant should it be needed.

"You didn't think that I might have wanted to be active as we approached and landed?" the other huffed slightly, the Spartan somehow able to feel her annoyance as a physical thing, a thing he promptly ignored knowing she would have already reviewed all his suits recordings and probably the Pellicans data recorders to boot and so was as up to date as any of them.

"Doctor Halsey volunteered to pick you up from Captain Keyes while I was busy briefing the team" the Chief replied shortly, keeping his helmet speakers turned off as Halsey stood and straightened her unremarkable laboratory clothes, James already up and moving to position at the ramp. "And she only just presented you to me. Are you ready for this?"

"Of course" she replied airily. "I spent the last half an hour before Halsey yanked me in ONI's archives pulling every wireless network and communications protocol used in the later 20th and early 21st century, military and civilian. Every encryption protocol in regular use by the US Military, compilers, code, the whole suit of computer architecture - most of which is rather unsurprisingly similar to the foundations of modern computer science. Far more so than Covenant technology at least".

"You are not authorized to attempt any systems intrusion without my approval" the Chief put his foot down quickly, before the wilful AI got any ideas. The last thing he needed was Cortana getting caught in the middle of a network intrusion during negotiations with the crew of the Odyssey after all. On the other hand, if things did fall to pieces, her bleeding edge network intrusion capabilities might well prove to be the edge needed to get his team off this ship safely...

"Monitor their network traffic passively as much as you want, but don't do anything actively that might give away your presence or upset our hosts".

"I wasn't planning on it" she replied, sounding almost amused at his response. "Just staying prepared for any eventuality" she said, before her tone shifted to be far more professional as green text started scrolling at a dizzying rate down a small sub-window on his HUD, even as Hood stepped back into the compartment from the cockpit. "Armour diagnostics in the green. Linking to the Pellicans COM ... encrypted uplink established with the Autumn, FLEETCOM eight is secure and online. Neural interface is stable, all combat systems at 100%. I'm ready when you are Chief".

With a nod, the Chief triggered the general pre-assigned COM frequency for all personnel on this mission.

"All hands status check. Blue Leader, online"

"Blue Two, Go" James replied at once, glancing at him from his position next to the ramp and shooting him an ever so subtle Spartan 'Good to Go' sign from his hand.

"Blue Three, Go" Li replied from the cockpit, his voice strong and

steady".

'_Blue Four, Go_' Kelly added, and John could hear the ever so subtle tone in her voice that said she was not at all happy about staying behind in the Pelican, but he knew she would do her job with absolute professionalism regardless, and so ignored it for now. They had all been under a lot recently, he'd have a talk with her later and make sure she was still at 100%.

'_Red Leader, online_' Fred now put in over the secure link from the Autumn, signalling that the twenty mission-capable Spartans under his command were ready to launch on board Zero-G booster frames to attempt a boarding action if required - although having seen what this ship could do against enemy small craft, he silently hoped it would _not_ come to that.

"Alright, here they come" Hood rejoined the group in the troop bay, drawing the Master Chiefs attention back to the here and now as the CNO straightened his cap and made one final check of his absolutely spotless uniform. "Remember, we are representatives of Earth, so act like it. James, hit the door".

The Pelicans troop bay ramp unlocked with the slightest of hisses of equalizing pressure, the Chief edging his way past Doctor Halsey to stand to the side of James and shielding both the Doctor and Admiral should this turn into an ambush.

"Blue Two, deployment pattern Bravo-One" the Chief ordered as the ramp dropped down just enough for them to squeeze out, and with a single wink of a blue acknowledgement light, the two Spartans moved forward, ducking out of the still opening ramp to drop lightly to the deck, staying locked side by side to shield, as best as they could, those behind them for a precious few seconds as they swept the bay.

A small party was approaching from the right on the otherwise empty looking bay - far _too_ empty he realized; these people had clearly moved everything that could be moved out of the bay before they had arrived. Probably to stop them getting a close look at their technology.

He didn't mind; it also stripped away most cover an ambush party could use to launch an attack from. Of course, that also meant the opposite was true in terms of finding cover _from _an ambush...

"Party of five moving in, fifty meters and closing" the Chief observed, his visor refocusing on the group with a thought. He at once recognized Landry, Jackson and Carter from Lieutenant Haversons' hastily put together briefing package for his team, the two officers were in what looked to be formal uniforms quite similar to formal UNSC service dress for some groundside departments with Jackson in a civilian suit, which was a good sign that they weren't planning on any foul play.

The two men flanking them however...

The two Spartans moved forward to make room behind them as their charges descended the ramp, but their eyes never left the two armed men flanking the 'welcoming party'. While their weapons were pointing

at the deck, he could tell by their grip, body language and gaze that they were very much in 'advance to contact' mode, their weapons held in a way that would let them bring them up at a moment's notice. Their spacing and positioning was textbook perfect - far enough apart that it would be difficult for a single person, even a Spartan, to engage both with a cold draw before one could get a shot off, but close enough to support their own people. But above that, the way they moved, the way their gaze sized up him and James as much as he was doing it to them ...

These were professionals. Combat veterans.

"Two armed men in the party, close protection detail, armed with some kind of rifle" he stated for the benefit of the rest of his team, a quartet of blue status lights flashing for a in acknowledgement of his report as he, reluctantly, broke ranks with James to allow Admiral Hood followed by Doctor Halsey to walk out, the two Spartans falling in silently on their flanks to mirror the placement of their opposite numbers. "And they look like they know how to use them".

"Analysing" Cortana added on the private channel he shared with her a moment later, a flicker of blue wireframes seeming to shift across the soldiers as the AI did her work. "I have a match; USAS-12's. Twelve Gauge automatic shotguns with twenty round drum magazines. Developed in the later twentieth century on Earth, Korea. Their sidearms? No idea, I'd guess something alien from the odd design".

The Chief tensed slightly at that report. At close range, weapons of that type were almost ideal for doing maximum damage as quickly as possible. If they were loaded with heavy slugs, they would even stand more than a fair chance of being able to punch through his suits shields and armour with a heavy enough burst of fire. And an unknown sidearm just made things worse in terms of anticipating tactical responses.

Still, he pushed the analysis to the side. It wasn't easy for him to ignore a possible threat - years on the battlefield had honed his instincts to a very fine edge indeed - but this _wasn't _a battlefield. Close-protection drills were part of the Spartans training - but it was hardly a common mission for them as, simply put, there were far too few Spartan-II's to go around to waste them in rear area work. Even if their ability to instantly switch between 'statuesque inactivity' and 'whirlwind of unimaginable destruction' made them highly effective in situations like this, it was still something generally left to 'lesser; special forces units like ODSTs.

>But in all honestly, his problem wasn't that he was not ready for this type of mission; it was that there was a clear contradiction between his mission orders to protect the Admiral and Doctor Halsey on one hand, with the orders from the aforementioned Admiral that put him under highly restrictive ROEs that, by definition, prevented him from performing this mission.<p>

Still, as CPO Mendez had taught him a long time ago, he didn't have to and rarely _would _like his orders.

He just had to follow them.

"Activating motion tracker" Cortana spoke up again as the distance between the two parties closed to perhaps twenty meters, Hood and Landry angling directly for each other now with relatively brisk steps. "I have four ... make that five new contacts above us, in the catwalks" she replied, a series of yellow blips materializing across the top of his HUD, the Chiefs eyes flicking up to scan the indicated location. A pair of catwalks did indeed stretch down both sides of the hanger bay roof, and his enhanced eyesight could make out the figures skulking in the shadows behind the floodlights mounted on the underside of the twin catwalks, bracketing them.

"Fire team on overwatch" he said for the benefit of his team as the two parties came to a halt, a cascade of acknowledgement lights flashing at his report. By now, Kelly and Li would be gearing up in the troop bay, and it would fall to them to engage the snipers if this went south - although they were well within pistol range with the superb accuracy the M6D offered.

>The two escorts on the opposing side hanging back slightly as their delegation moved forward into close range. No salutes were offered or given by either side, neatly cutting across awkward protocol questions of who would salute first and who was the superior officer.<p>

"General Landry?" Admiral Hood asked as he reached polite conversation range. "My name is Terrance Hood - I am the Commander in Chief of the UNSC and, at this time, the nominal leader of the United Earth Government".

There was a slight reaction from the group opposite him at the carefully worded introduction, but they got themselves back under control almost immediately, Landry extending his hand as he stepped forward.

"Welcome aboard the _Odyssey_ Admiral" General Landry replied entirely affably, extending his hand which Hood took and shook briefly but cordially. "Admiral Whitcomb is not with you?"

"No, I'm afraid not" Hood replied, "although he sends his regards hopes he will be able to meet you soon to thank you, in person, for your efforts on his peoples behalf. But as I am sure you can understand, dealing with the aftermath of the Covenant attack has left a great mess on Reach that he is quite busy dealing with right now".

"Of course" the other replied reassuringly before he turned to the side slightly. "May I present Doctor Daniel Jackson, a member of SG1 - our flagship reconnaissance and first contact team".

"Doctor Jackson" Hood extended his hand, which was again taken in a firm grip.

"Admiral" the other replied with a polite nod.

"And Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter" Landry continued, gesturing to the other person flanking him. "Also a member of SG1".

"Colonel" Hood again shook hands briefly before turning to gesture at the Spartan standing next to him. "I believe you all know James?"

"Good to see you again Petty Officer" Landry said, extending a hand which James took -very carefully the Chief noted approvingly - in his metal gauntlet and shook briefly, even as he offered a friendly nod . "I am taking it that your mission was successful?"

"It was General" the other nodded. "And I'd like to thank you, again, for everything you did to make it a success. If the Covenant had gotten a hold of that NAV data..." he let his voice trail off, but everyone in the bay knew what the consequences of that could have been - the kind of blood bath that would have eventuated if that map had fallen into Covenant hands.

"It was our pleasure" Landry waved off the thanks. "I'm just glad that you made it out alive Son".

"And this" Hood continued, turning to look at him now, "this is the team leader of the Spartan Commandos" Hood said with no small amount of respect in his voice that the Chief was honest enough to admit made him feel pride in his team and his accomplishments. "Master Chief Petty Officer John-117".

Now Landry turned his attention on him, and the Chief felt the presence behind this person as almost a physical force as soon as he did. This person, he perceived almost immediately, was a leader, not simply a commander - he could see it in the man's eyes, feel it in the way he was being sized up, weighed and judged with nothing more than a brief glance. No matter the fact that he towered over the other physically, he couldn't help but feel for that moment that the opposite was true.

>If James's mission reports had been correct, this was a man who had been chosen to lead this Earth's front line command dealing with alien situations, on a world still almost in complete ignorance of the very existence of anything outside their Sol system. This was a man who specialized in dealing with the unknown, the impossible; a man whose area of operations stretched across a Galaxy and who, as much as Admiral Hood and Admiral Cole before him, had the fate of a civilisation riding on his shoulders ... but had thrived under the challenge.

In short, this was not a man to be underestimated.

"Master Chief" the other said, again extending his hand which the Chief took - just as carefully as James had. "A pleasure to meet you. Your subordinate handled himself in a highly ... unusual situation with great skill and intelligence, and brought great credit to your command and the UNSC".

"Thank you General" the Chief responded with a military nod as he accepted the complement, but pleased to see James had made such a good impression. "And I would also like to extend a personal thanks for saving his life" he replied, hesitating for a second as he flashed back to that awful moment where the needle rounds had exploded on James's thruster pack and sent him spinning into space and out of sight, before he collected himself, seeing a hint of understanding in the expression on General Landry's face. "I appreciate everything you did for my team and my mission, and I can assure you I won't forget it".

"We don't leave our people behind Chief - I can see that is something we have in common" Landry said simply, turning to face the final

person in their party as the Chief took the hint and fell back information, the words nonetheless striking a chord with him that made him start to understand James' report in a new light; his almost emphatic statement that they were people that could be trusted becoming clearer even from these few minutes in contact.

"And this" Hood said finally, nodding at the woman standing patiently next to him, "is Doctor Catherine Halsey. She is the chief Scientist at the Office of Naval Intelligence - and probably the single smartest person I have ever met. She insisted at coming along to examine your situation in person".

"Then, you are indeed most welcome aboard, Doctor" Landry again shook hands.

"Thank you, General" Haley responded with an abbreviated bow before she turned her gaze on Colonel Carter. "And I look forward to working with you Colonel, your work impressed me in a way that very few people ever have before".

"_My_ Work? Carter asked with a slight tilt of her head, before realization appeared on her face. "You mean the field repairs on James' suit".

"I do" the other nodded once, her expression focused. "MJOLNIR armour is one of the more sophisticated engineering accomplishments of the UNSC. But in a matter of hours without any prior experience or exposure to the underlying technology, you managed to engineer a field repair to combat damage from scratch, without any technical documentation, spare parts or assistance from qualified personnel" she stated in a matter of fact tone, reaching up to adjust her glasses slightly as she did so. "I assure you, that I can count on one hand the number of people I have met in my life who might be capable of doing the same - and these are people with some background in UNSC technology".

"Well, I just repaired some of the power units casing and refilled the reactor with Deuterium" Carter downplayed her efforts with some slight embarrassment at the praise. "The technology and engineering that have been put into the suit is incredible - especially given the relatively basic materials used in construction for the technology. Whoever designed that suit is a genius".

The Doctors smile increased slightly at this - the Chief _couldn't_ help but notice - no matter how much he was sure she would deny it later.

"Thank you, but it took me decades to develop the technology to this point" Halsey replied lightly, apparently enjoying the look of surprised revelation in the Colonels eyes at the admission. "But from what James has told me" she pressed on, glancing to the Spartan in question briefly, "your entire Stargate program is barely ten years old. From the first trip through it to another planet to being able to build ships like _this" _she said, raising her arms to take in the vast bay around them "with completely alien uses of physics and technology to us inside a decade is almost impossible to believe. Yet" she added glancing around the vast space with a slightly wry smile, "here we stand".

"Colonel" Landry broke back into the conversation after sharing a

look with Hood that spoke volumes about how they both felt this would go, "perhaps you would like to take Doctor Halsey to your lab and 'talk science' with her, while I take Admiral Hood on a tour of the ship? We can regroup in an hour in the meeting room - if you have no objection Doctor?"

"That would be quite acceptable" Halsey nodded politely, Carter also nodding and with a smile, gesturing her off to an airlock as they started to talk about the events that had brought them here.

"Blue Two, stay with Halsey" the Chief ordered over the COM. Splitting up was something of a risk security wise, but his gut was increasingly telling him that he didn't have anything to fear from these people, and he trusted his instincts.

Not that he would let them interfere with doing his job mind you.

"Status reports every five minutes".

An indicator light flashed blue as James acknowledged the order, falling into escort with Halsey as she and Carter walked away, already starting to compare notes on faster than light travel and Nth dimensional causality issues.

He was hardly uneducated, far from it in fact, but within five seconds, their conversation was on a level far above any hope he had of understanding.

"Why do I get the feeling that they are going to come back, having invented some kind of doomsday machine" Doctor Jackson wondered, staring after the two scientists as they reached one of the airlocks and vanished into the ship, the towering figure of James following with the Marine bringing up the rear.

"I can calculate the probability on that if you want" Cortana added somewhat unhelpfully over the private channel he shared with her, as General Landry gestured Hood forward to start the tour of the ship, the two Odyssey soldiers splitting up, with one moving to follow Halsey and James at a distance, the other staying with their group as Landry led them to the nearby airlock.

"No thanks" the Chief replied, striving to remain focused and ignore the typically high-spirited AI's attempt at humour. "Anything else to report?"

"Actually yes, I've just decrypted their tactical teams radio frequency" she added in an off-hand way. "I'm sure any specialised infiltration and analysis Smart AI designed for network and communications intrusions could do it really".

"What are you hearing?" he asked, wondering why she enjoyed showing off so much. Surely a 'I have access to their COM system' would suffice?

"Not much so far" she admitted. "Based on call signs, there appears to be five different security units. Direction finding puts them relatively close by, but except for the team above us on overwatch, they all appear to be standing by out of sight. Judging from the traffic, I'd say they are almost as concerned about not being

perceived as hostile and provoking a reaction as Hood was"

That immediately made the Chief feel more comfortable with the situation.

>Not even close to comfortable enough to make him let his guard down of course.<p>

"Keep monitoring, let me know if anything changes" he said, stepping through the airlock with the rest of the group, his attention remaining as solidly locked on the other soldier as it had since he had stepped off the Pelican as he eyed the odd looking side arm he was wearing, some kind of oddly shaped and silver coloured weapon.

Curious, probably alien technology - unknown capabilities.

Well if it was a sidearm, it probably wasn't more powerful than the standard rifles they were using.

Then again, the alien 'Staff Cannon' he had seen do rather impressive things to countless Covenant troops on Gamma Station hadn't looked terribly impressive either until he had seen it fuse jackals to the deck.

He resolved to keep an eye on that weapon, as the airlock door cycled closed behind them, cutting off any easy retreat and committing him. Centring himself and setting himself, he did what every soldier in history did the most - and hated the most.

He started waiting.

****11:48 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Slipstream Space - Unknown Vector, UNSC
Dusk

Commander Richard Lash stared at the wireframe representation of slipspace around his ship projected on the main bridge screen, fighting the urge to get up and pace as they were dragged further and further away from UNSC controlled space by the slipspace wake of the Covenant fleet. It had been over a day since the battle at Reach and he was still hard pressed to believe what he had seen, despite the fact that it had been recorded in flattering detail by the _Dusks _state of the art surveillance and sensor systems.

A Covenant fleet of unprecedented size had gotten its ass handed to it on a silver platter.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Not simply defeated or driven back, but _routed _with relatively acceptable casualties to the UNSC defenders! He didn't know who was in command of that mystery ship that had appeared to all but toy with the enemy before finally eliminating them in one of the most glorious moments of overkill this war had ever seen ...

>But whoever it was, he wanted to buy them a drink. An expensive drink. Hell, he'd leave them a blank check at 'The MAC Cannon' back on Earth - the Fleets preferred watering hole just outside the HQ which was most crews first stop to unwind after surviving a tour well enough to make it back to Earth in one piece.

It was _clearly_ some kind of ONI prototype; the Fleet rumour mill had been whispering for months now about some kind of super secret shipyard in Sols Ort Cloud building some kind of Super Ship. And he was willing to bet a month's pay that they had just seen the payoff - the ship in question thrown into service in a desperate attempt to hold the line - a plan that had clearly paid off beyond anyone's wildest dreams. His ships highly sensitive communications antennas had caught a burst transmission from the ship on the E-Band shortly after it had moved to intercept the main body of the Covenant fleet, a transmission his highly skilled ELINT team assured him had ONI's encryption fingerprints all over it, pretty much confirming the ships ID.

Ultimately, it didn't really matter _who_ _it_ was. What mattered was that humanity clearly now had the tools to fight back, effectively, against the Covenant fleet. Morale that had been sinking close to rock bottom only to start a recovery at Sigma Octanus IV would now be blasting sky high in the wake of this victory. It was time to hit the Covenant back, hard. All they needed was a _target_.

Finding that target was now _his_ _job_.

Dusk was a rarity in the UNSC fleet, a _Prowler_ class vessel not operated by the Office of Naval Intelligence but by a normal naval crew operating within the normal naval chain of command - attached directly to Admiral Whitcombs personal command rather than Second Fleet per se. The ships nominal command was Captain Marko Iglesias, but through that sheer bad luck that randomly dropped into military operations the Old Man had been shipped off to Earth for radiation treatment barely a day before WINTER CONTINGENCY had been declared. _Dusk_ had in fact been due to stand down for a much needed refit while their Captain was off-ship, but the Covenants surprise appearance on Reach had rather abruptly put paid to that idea.

And so _Acting Captain_ _Lash_ and his crew had gotten to work, and he couldn't be prouder of the way they had stood to without any complaints, casting off in record time and moving into the battlespace where their unique skills could once again prove the difference between victory and defeat.

Their first task in the somewhat confusing situation had been providing secure and SATCOM support a Spartan team codenamed NOBEL as they had performed a number of night reconnaissance missions around the Covenants foothold in the Viery territory. After the Covenant had started amusing themselves by sniping at Reach's low orbit communications and surveillance network when they got board, it had fallen to the stealth ship to maintain coverage through the gap in the network. They had provided the same service for the Army and Marine Brigades that had been unleashed and steadily tightened the noose on the Covenant foothold, until the _Long Night of Solace_ had burst from her camouflaged nest and burned for orbit, _Dusk_ barely avoiding a collision as the titanic Super Carrier had blasted her way clear at speed through a hail of MAC rounds before she had made a precision slipspace jump to the other side of the moon.

Things had moved fast from that point as Covenant reinforcements had poured into the system a short time later. His ship had played a vital role in 'shaping' the battlefield as the fleets had formed up, darting undetected between the lead elements to sow dozens of

stealthy Hornet nuclear mines in the path of the enemy that they had stumbled right into. The carefully placed vacuum enhanced warheads had not directly killed any ships, but they had done sterling work in overloading shields on several dozen Covenant ships which had left them easy targets for the furious opening barrage of fire from the Second Fleet backstopped by the 20 Orbital 'Super' MAC cannon equipped Orbital Defence Platforms - the shattering wall of fire appearing to cause the Covenant to flinch and back off after a couple of return salvos had claimed a couple of dozen UNSC ships in return, the ODP's overwhelming firepower catching them off guard, or so it had seemed. Of course, the UNSC's feeling of triumph had turned to ashes in minutes as panicked distress calls from the ground had made it clear that the whole push had been nothing more than a diversion to allow the Covenant to slip new strike teams through to hit key strategic targets. And as if mocking the humans best shot, a new and far more deadly fleet had arrived to join in the slaughter, this one top heavy in CAS and CCS class ships; the message unsaid but loud and clear that the Covenant would not be denied and that their best defences were as nothing next to their might.

Well, this new mystery ship had sent them a message right back in the most spectacular fashion as it entered the engagement, vaporizing more Covenant ships in a single engagement than even the legendary Preston Cole himself had managed to do at Psi Serpentis. And Cole had mostly been dealing with lighter ships with a bare handful of heavier ships present; this ship on the other hand had taken out over three hundred Cruiser or heavier starships with probably ten times the firepower to play with! In an open battle, in open space, with the use of a weapon whose sheer destructive power had chilled him as much as it had exhilarated him.

And as the glow of the detonation had faded, the leftover Covenant ships held sensibly in reserve by their commander thanks to the damage they had taken had then done something he had never seen the aliens do before.

They had run!

With the -presumably- ONI ship barrelling in on them and clearly woefully outmatched in any kind of direct fight, it was the correct decision.

>But the Covenant never ran, everyone knew that! No matter how lopsided the odds, no matter how useless the gesture, the Covenant always stayed in the fight to the end because apparently Death was preferable to the Dishonour of returning in defeat. So unexpected had their actions been that FLEETCOM itself had been taken by surprise. His ship had, as per standard Prowler procedure, had kept its Slipspace capacitors fully charged, apparently to watch Reach burn at the Covenants hands before heading back to Earth to report in. And so, acting entirely on his own initiative, he had ordered his ship to match vectors and engage their Slipspace drive.

Perhaps fortune did favour the bold or foolish, because their timing had been impeccable, their ship becoming 'caught up' in the Slipspace Wake of the far faster Covenant ships. According to his navigators best estimates, the Covenant were not moving terribly quickly. Faster than a UNSC ship could travel of course, but substantially lower than the top speeds of the aliens more advanced warships.

The most likely scenario was simply that some of the damaged ships had damage to their FTL systems and so the lower speed was the best the fleet could manage, but it suggested to him that their trip may be an extended one. Which meant in turn that most of the crew would have to go into the freezer to conserve resources, never an ideal situation for an intelligence vessel with almost no ability to defend itself outside of its stealth technology should they drop out of slipspace at Covenant central.

But somehow, Lash didn't think they were on a course to Covenant central. As best Lieutenant Durruno, his helmsmen could work out, their trajectory was almost perpendicular to the direct route to what was thought to be Covenant space. In fact, projecting their probable path drew a straight line out beyond UNSC space towards the Galactic Core.

Where were these ships going? He'd be very disappointed if had come all this way to watch them fly into some uncharted black hole to absolve themselves of getting their shiny backsides handed to them!

His musing was interrupted as an alert chimed on Lieutenant Yang's station, the painfully young officer jerking up as displays on his board started to fluctuate.

"Sir, I'm detecting Åerenkov fluctuations ... confirmed, it looks like the Covenant are about to drop out of Slipspace".

"Stand by for transition" Lash quickly ordered, sending his previously inactive crew into a sudden flurry of inactivity, grateful that their helpless ride was about to end and they would shortly again be in control of their own destiny. "Engage full stealth protocols".

"_External power offline_" Lieutenant Command Cho in the core room acknowledged the order over her COM link to the bridge promptly. "Spinning engine cores to ten percent power, engine dampers are online. Slipspace capacitors fully charged".

"Ablative baffles engaged" Lieutenant Command Waters added from the weapons station - although with the expending of its nuclear load, the prowler actually had very few weapons, just a Helix array with a handful of heavier autocannons for anti-fighter work and about as useful against any Covenant warship as harsh language. "Adaptive skin is reset and active, texture buffers full. All weapons hot and recessed".

"Radiation fluctuation increasing" Yang warned. Estimating emergence in five ... four-

"-Jumping in three ... two ... one ... _jump!_" Durruno synchronized the drives and with a slight shudder, _Dusk _emerged from the tangled mess of Slipspace into realspace, the graphic wireframe tunnels of lines snapping off to be replaced by the far more reassuring vista of Stars ... and the less reassuring purple glow of Covenant engines, all of which were backstopped by an enormous looking planet.

"New course, zero one six by zero eight zero, role zero nine zero" Lash ordered at once. Standard procedure when making a stealth

reversion from FTL under cover of other ships was for a Prowler crew was to make an immediate course change, just in case anyone caught a glimpse of them in the storm of EM interference fleet scale Slipspace jumps caused. "Yang?"

There was a pause as the officer watched his screens intently, before visibly seeming to sag with relief.

"No active sensor sweeps directed at either us or our emergence point, the Covenant fleet is maintaining formation and accelerating at standard thrust on course for a slingshot trajectory adjustment around the lip of the planet. Covenant fleet count is correct".

"Slipspace drive recharging, jump capacity in ten minutes" _Cho interrupted from the engine room, Lash acknowledging the information with a tap of a button before he turned back to the sensor station.

"Anything else in system?" Lash asked.

"Passive sensors don't have anything, but I am picking up scattered COM traffic from some point around this planet on Covenant frequencies, looks like the Covenant have something here".

"Any idea yet where 'here' is?" Lash turned to Durruno.

"Computers are still crunching star patterns and stellar reference points" the officer said as she carefully adjusted their ships course, keeping the ship 'bow-on' where it would present the minimal cross section to Covenant sensors. "Without an AI it'll probably take an hour to properly fix our position. For now, best I can do is roughly five hundred light years coreward".

Lash whistled slightly. That distance would take his ship, equipped with one of the fastest slipspace engines humanity had built, at least seven, eight days to cross at its maximum rated speed. Probably two to three times that if he didn't want to risk blowing the slipspace core after the first twenty four hours of travel. But it was still, strategically speaking, far too close to UNSC space and right on the line of what _had _been UNSC space before the Covenant had pushed them back.

Was it some kind of forward supply depot?

A Shipyard?

A Staging base?

Whatever it was, he would be _more_ than happy to get some long range imagery of it, if it could get one of those new ONI ships to come here to finish the job they started at Reach.

"New contact" Yang spoke up, the centre screen zooming in past the Covenant fleet to focus on the edge of the planet ahead of them, a grey sphere slowly rising as the Dusk followed the Covenant fleet at a distance. "Looks like a moon in orbit - big one too, at least 20K plus diameter".

"Is that where the Covenant fleet is heading?" Lash shot Durruno a

look. A smaller secondary screen next to the main display activated, a green wireframe of the planet - which he realized from the size displayed on the screen compared to the moon could only be a gas giant, one much bigger than the Jovian planets back in Sol - with tracks of the ships in orbit projected as bending around the planet.

"Not quite, it looks like their course is taking them to an L1 point between the moon and gas giant".

"Logical place to put a space station" Lash speculated, studying the course projection. If he stayed behind the Covenant fleet like this, he would have to eventually either risk flying straight through a hornets' nest, or, fire his breaking thrusters to come to a relative halt at this same distance behind them, when they stopped and be essentially immobilized.

Neither option greatly appealed to him.

"New course, heading..." he checked his math against the wireframe schematic, "heading one six eight by zero zero zero, ten percent power. Shift our course to take us into a high orbit past that moon. We'll drift at a tangent past whatever it is they're hiding there, get the recon data and then when the moon masks us, we'll make a Slipspace transition without risk of being detected".

"Aye Sir, One Six Eight by Zero Zero Zero, commencing burn" Durruno crisply repeated the order, the ship gently rocking as the main engines ignited, slowly but steadily pushing the Dusk away from orbiting the massive gas giant as the Covenant fleet descended to almost skim the edge of the atmosphere, Dusks bow coming out to point off the leading edge of the moon that had fully risen from behind the planet by now.

Yang's gaze lingered on the tactical plot showing their projected course for a few moments longer, grudgingly impressed by the Covenant's commander. By taking this slingshot trajectory, the Covenant fleet would almost touch the atmosphere of the planet before being thrown back out at an angle that would intersect the L1 point. Yang had to give it to the person in charge, it was an elegant course to take and not one for the faint hearted, telling him a lot about whoever was in charge over there. Their fleet had more than enough raw power to simply burn around the planet, but they were taking the much more challenging 'scenic route' with minimal engine power in a tight formation, despite the combat damage visible on most of them.

No matter how badly they had been torn up by the UNSC in an unprecedented defeat, this fleet still had discipline, skill and pride in their abilities. Which was useful data in itself to bring back. This was not a broken enemy they were following.

"No sign of reaction from the Covenant ships" Yang added as they came firmly onto their new course, moving at a much higher pace now. "No sensor sweeps, no increased chatter".

"Engines shut down, NAV to station keeping. Estimate we'll reach the optimal point for a slipspace jump in ... six minutes".

"Triple-check all countersensor packages, confirm we are dark" he ordered Waters with a quick glance.

"Confirmed, we're rigged for dark and silent running, five point check" Waters replied, double checking his board -although he had no doubt checked it only moments ago. Stealth was their only weapon, if their position was given away, their expected survival time was exactly as long as it would take for a Covenant ship to reach weapons range. Most Prowler deep recon missions like this had a hard fifteen-twenty minute timeframe to get in, then get out even if they were detected doing so, because the some data was better than the risk of losing _all _the data should the ship overstay their welcome.

It was no small wonder that Prowler crews were cycled out so rapidly. The stress was utterly crushing.

"Moving into sunlight" Durruno said, the slightest hint of tension in her voice now clear, as on the main screen the systems primary crested the horizon, colouring the formerly dark black surface of the gas giant a stunning marbled swirl of white, red and brown. It also transfixed them in his mind like a prison searchlight_, _the ablative baffles on the surface absorbing and conducting the solar radiation away from the skin into an internal heat exchanger as the Adaptive Camouflage adjusted to ensure no light reflected back at the enemy. But it was hardly a perfect system and if someone was _especially _lucky or paying very close attention...

"Still no reaction from the Covenant fleet" Yang called out to everyone's relief. "Estimating fifty seconds until ... "

Lash frowned as the other trailed off, turning away from the tactical display to glance at Yang and finding his eyes and locked on his display ... his mouth hanging open mid word, the man simply ... staring.

"Yang?"

There was no response.

"Lieutenant Yang!" he barked in his old XO voice.

"That" snapped the man snapped out of it.

"Uh Sir, I have a hard contact at the L1 point" he said in a slightly shaky voice as he worked his console with suddenly shaky hands. "Activating starboard camera and enhancing".

The camera feed of the moon vanished to be replaced with the view from the ships starboard side, centring and zooming in on-

if he had been asked how long he simply stared at the screen, Commander Richard Lash would have sworn an oath that it had to have been at least half an hour. In reality, only five seconds or so passed, but such was the overwhelming feeling like the world had just dropped out from under him that time seemed to slow to a crawl for those long moments.

Rising above the horizon as if chasing the moon they were heading towards, a_ massive_ ring shaped structurewas emerging into view on

the screen, gleaming in the sunlight hitting it, as if mocking the Dusk skulking in the shadows at the edge of the planetary system. Little detail was clear right now, but he could see the faintest hint of complex geometric patterns layered on the outer surface of the ring, speaking of something not natural in any sense of the word, but built. Constructed. Artificial.

Except of course it was an absurdity! Who could possibly built something like that?

"Elisa preserve us..." Waters broke the rigid silence on the bridge in a tone filled with awe and no small amount of disbelief.

"Uh ... sensors show that ... it ... has a diameter of approximately ten thousand kilometres, bit over twenty, perhaps twenty two klicks thick" the other said, smoothing over his eyebrow with one slightly shaking hand absently as he studied the readings, the Camera refocusing and recalibrating as it adjusted for the solar light striking it - and if he wasn't sitting down right now, Lash was convinced he would have crashed to the desk. The inner surface of the ring now clearly visible contained the sparkling blues of oceans and the green, browns and yellows of land visible in the long range imagery. And, of all the insane things in the universe, there was something that look suspiciously like a hurricane forming over one of the large bodies of water!?

Lash finally found his voice again and took a slow breath to calm himself, as the ring continued to 'rise'. He was the Captain he repeated like a mantra to himself. His men looked to him for guidance. He was the Captain...

"Alright people, heads down and back to work. Waters, sweep the area, look for any more Covenant ships and monitor all traffic" he ordered in a voice surprisingly calm and in control, despite the fact that he did not feel even close to calm or in control. "Yang, full spectrographic, maximum possible passive analysis and data collection. Durrano adjust pitch and roll angles to keep... it ... centred for as long as possible. Make sure everything is on High-Def capture mode, I want every scrap of data we can get - and make sure all three servers are backing up. We might only get one look, make it count".

The flurry of orders snapped everyone out of their stupor and activity re-commenced, albeit a much faster pace, as his crew worked to gather every scrap of data they could before they would need to jump out. Yang's hands all but danced over his console frantically as he pointed every sensor they had on the ring to suck in every detail he could - he'd let the AI's process it later, right now his only job was to suck in every single digital bit he could. There was a limit to what they could get on passive sensors, but he didn't dare risk going active, even with the systems that had a low probability of being detected. All it would take would be one Plasma torpedo to end this mission, and he had no desire to end his life in that way, now when they had to get out of this system alive to sound the alarm.

"Sir, Spectrographic analysis confirms that whatever it is made of, it's nothing like any material the Covenant use" one of the analysis techs spoke up several frantic minutes later from across the bridge. "I'm also confirming it has an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere

along the inner surface, large bodies of water, clouds ... Sir, this thing appears to have a viable ecosystem on the inner surface!"

"Waters, any new contacts?" Lash asked his weapons officer quickly. "Surely they have some defenders around it?"

"Confirmed, I have ten...no, make that twelve tracks holding position roughly twenty thousand klicks from the contact" Waters spoke up next, the camera shifting from the impossible construct to the far more familiar -and maddeningly comforting- silhouette of Covenant warships. Those at least they understood. "I make it one Assault Carrier and six CCS class Cruisers holding station - the rest look like support ships".

"Only seven ships here to guard this?" Lash said with a raised eyebrow. "That can't be right, check your scans".

"My board is clear Sir" Waters said with a helpless shrug, but none the less he repeated his checks, which again stubbornly insisted only a token Covenant force was present. "Funny; if this was a Covenant base, you'd expect the same kinds of presence we saw at Pegasi Delta at the very least. And that was just a glorified deuterium refinery - it had nothing on this!".

Lash bit his lower lip. Their questions merely grew with every moment that passed. But again, he forced himself to push past his desire to stay and learn. Their duty was clear - and they couldn't risk hanging around here to look for more data - lest they lose it all. They needed to get out of here and sound the alarm.

"Yang, any more data?"

"Plenty, but little I can make sense of" the other shrugged slightly. "I'm not detecting any transmissions from the object, but there is plenty of chatter between the two Covenant groups, encrypted".

"Record it all, let ONI sort it out when we get back" Lash ordered. "Time to jump point?"

"Ninety seconds" Durruno answered. "The moon will mask us in twenty".

"Engineering" he said, tapping the COM channel on his seats armrest. "Slipspace status?"

"Capacitors at eighty percent and charging, ready for jump in sixty five seconds" Cho replied at once.

"Very well" Lash acknowledged. "NAV, lay in a random jump per the Cole Protocol that's not pointing anywhere near human space. We'll drop out in an hour, pinpoint our exact stellar location, then we'll make best speed for Reach".

"Laying in a randomized course, aye"

"Waters" he ordered as they entered the moons shadow, the view of the spectacular ring world vanishing in place of the grey surface of the moon, "launch a Black Widow COMSAT, program it to record all

transmissions in the system and angle for insertion to polar orbit. It can keep recording while we sound the alarm".

The other nodded and turned to work his board hurriedly as the timer on the main status display counted down the remaining seconds until they would arrive at their jump point, a familiar and welcome rumble passing through the ships frame to let everyone know that the slipspace drives were coming online".

"COMSAT programmed and ready for launch" Waters reported as his board chimed in readiness.

"Execute" Lash ordered, turning to look at Durruno and flicking his finger forward at her. "As soon as it's clear, _jump_".

On the dark side of the moon, a black patch of space seemed to shimmer for a moment as a small basketball sized object painted a dull non-reflective black was ejected out of a launch tube, tiny thrusters working furiously to orient the probe into a high polar orbit over the large moon that would let it emotionlessly maintain a hidden vigil from everyone in this system, as the swirling blue flash of a slipspace transition consumed the ship that had launched it, her entry and exit through the system going completely unnoticed by the Covenant presence in system.

Which wasn't to say it went unnoticed by _everyone_ in the system.

****12:05 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Starboard Briefing Room, USS Odyssey, Epsilon Eridani System

Catherine Haley swept into the briefing room and found herself disappointed, if entirely unsurprised, to find that the predominant colour was grey. If there was one thing that overwhelmingly supported the conclusion that these people were humans no different than those from her Earth once you stripped away all their technological differences, it was the fact that this ship was coloured in the precise same shade of gunmetal gray as any UNSC ship she had ever set foot on in every possible location.

The conference room was already full as she stepped in, with Hood, Landry, Jackson and Maldoran already seated at the table. Hood and Landry faced each other at the ends of the table with the two other SGC personnel sitting down the table to his right. Without breaking stride, she stepped up to the chair directly to The Admirals right as Samantha Carter squeezed past the towering pair of Spartans who formed up at the door - flanked it turn by the two soldiers who had been shadowing them - and started to work her way around the table to join her teammates.

"Ah. Doctor, Colonel" Landry nodded to both of them as she carefully pulled the chair out as the door closed behind her. "I was just about to send a search party. I trust you had a productive discussion?"

"Indeed we did" she replied with a polite nod. "So much so that we lost track of the time. I do hope we did not keep you waiting terribly long".

Actually, productive was something of an understatement. Samantha Carter, was quite probably one of the smartest people she had ever met - and that was not an observation she made lightly. Their discussions had jumped wildly from topic to topic as they had tried to keep up with each other, comparing notes on their FTL systems had naturally been an outgrowth from the initial discussions of how they had come to 'jump' realities. Which, in turn, had led quite naturally into highly detailed theorizing on subspace/slipspace mechanics which had covered the surface of a whiteboard with mathematics perhaps ten people Halsey personally knew _might_ be able to grasp, before they had been recalled to the meeting.

Even though she knew this meeting was more important, she honestly could not dispute that she was somewhat annoyed at having being pulled away from perhaps the most intellectually stimulating encounters she had partaken in since the shouting matches with her one-time protag Ellen Anders had ended with the disappearance of the _Spirit of Fire_.

Still, her conversations with the Colonel and her direct observations of this ship had crystallized her conclusions - and it was vital that she was here for this rather ... delicate ... phase of their negotiations.

"Not at all" Landry assured her as she settled into her chair fully. "But now that we are all here, we should get down to business".

"Very well" Hood replied exchanging a glance with Halsey who in turn nodded ever so slightly. He turned back to face Landry, but not before his eyes shot her a look that said he truly hoped she knew what she was doing. "Before we discuss anything else, I'd like to formally on behalf of Earth and all her Colonies thank you for intervening on our behalf. Hundreds of millions of people are alive thanks to your decision - and you may have saved countless more if this defeat forces the Covenant to back off".

"Your Petty Officer was most eloquent" Landry replied, leaning forward slightly himself, with a brief glance at James standing like a statue beside the door at parade rest, who none the less gave a slight nod of thanks to the General for the comment before he turned back. "With that said, you should know that I was fully prepared to let the Covenant fleet disengage if they had agreed to withdraw from the system. I used our Mark IX warhead as a last resort when it became clear the Covenant were intent on destroying this world to the last man standing - and that nothing less would save Reach".

"Understandable. You have no quarrel with the Covenant" Hood replied with a nod, leaving unsaid the fact that the reserve was certainly not true. Not now, after an entire Covenant _fleet_ was dead at their hands. "But none the less, you have left us greatly in your debt. And I can assure you that the UNSC always pays its debts" he said, turning to gesture slightly at Halsey sitting next to him. "Doctor Halsey is the Chief Scientist at the Office of Naval Intelligence. She oversees the UNSC's Research and Development arm - which also maintains a strong network of affiliations through the civilian world. I am putting her at your disposal - subject to critical war effort needs of the needs of the UNSC - to assist you in figuring out

how you got here and how to get you back home. But while you are here with us" he continued before Landry could speak up at that announcement, reaching into a vest pocket on his dress uniform and pulling out a small plastic card, "the very _least _we can do is take care of you. This card" he held it up for all to see before putting it on the table to sliding it over to Colonel Carter who in turn passed it up to Daniel Jackson, "is essentially the direct descendent of the 'credit cards' you will be familiar with from your time".

The Cards trip down the table came to an abrupt halt at that point, in the hands of Valla Maldoran. She had been looking slightly disinterested in the proceedings in Halseys mind, but suddenly it seemed her undivided attention became abruptly focused on the card in question. So much so that General Landry reached over and pointedly pulled it from her hands - with only modest resistance from the woman, putting it in his own pocket after a brief examination.

"The card" Hood continued, and Catherine got the distinct impression he was working not to smile at the now miffed looking Valla, "will allow you to make any purchases from any world in the UNSC and have it charged to the Government directly if you need to resupply. Food, supplies, fuel for your ship, anything along those lines, just open a channel on the frequency listed on the back. We have an AI on standby around the clock that will be able to process any requests you may have from orbit, otherwise it will be accepted by any business on Reach or any UNSC world".

Landry, she noticed with interest, seemed surprised by the approach taken in these talks so far. In his shoes, she would have expected the UNSC to offer a Quid-Pro-Quo; their help to get home in exchange for technology and their help in making it work. It was in fact the approach Admirals Stanforth and Whitcomb had argued for and it was an entirely logical position. Both parties had something they wanted from each other and as such, a trade was in everyone's interest.

>None of the three Admirals looked particularly happy at the idea of essentially making an offer that came down to 'we'll help you get home after everything you've done _only _if you help us more', she conceded. But none the less, they had pushed it as the only real choice they had, for the good of the UNSC.

Catherine had disagreed. Such an approach was practical on the face of it, but she had reminded the cluster of Admirals that the crew of the _Odyssey_ had intervened in their battle for entirely autistic reasons. They had not acted in the heat of the moment, they had taken 'time out' in their dilation field to consider their situation, gotten a reasonable grasp of local history from James and _then _acted.

>More than how they had intervened, it was _why _they had intervened that had caught her attention when she had gone over the hurriedly written report Lieutenant Haverson had put together from his interviews with James. According to her Spartan, their Earth had faced down a similar situation before they had been able to develop ships and weapons to defend themselves from orbital attack. An alien species even more powerful than the Covenant they had stung one too many times had finally moved to burn their Earth to cinders, only to be blocked by the intervention of a yet _more _advanced species that Earth had befriended. General Landry had drawn a clear parallel between the two situations and made the decision to follow the example of these 'Asgard' to stand between the Covenant and Reach, if

only because it was probably the right thing to do, and he would worry about the repercussions later.

In her mind, the only logical way forward was to meet their altruism with altruism of their own, and then find a way to gain access to their technology on now equal ground. It had taken some convincing but she had great practice at staring down senior military men, convincing Hood that it was the better approach to take.

And be it on her head if she failed.

"Admiral, this is a very generous gesture" Landry replied with a genuinely surprised and appreciative expression on his face. "I can assure you we will do our best to impose on the UNSC as little as possible".

"It's no imposition" Hood assured him with a shake of his head. "Frankly, it's the least we can do after everything you did for us ... which makes me somewhat uncomfortable now to ask you for yet more help. But the UNSC is in no position now to let pride get in the way of asking".

Now, everyone at the table seemed to straighten up slightly as Hood made it clear that they were getting to the 'business end' of the discussions.

"You are looking for access to our military technology" Landry clarified.

"We are" Hood nodded, moving straight to the point. "The strategic situation, the major defeat the Covenant have suffered notwithstanding, is not looking good for us. Your actions here have brought us valuable time, but the hard fact is that we are down to under forty percent of the territory, sixty percent of the population and thirty percent of the resources we started this war with. Not to mention the fact that our economy is getting close to breaking point and our easy military manpower reserves are near tapped out. The Covenant on the other hand have been untouched as far as hitting their core territories are concerned. We've made them pay in blood for every planet they have taken, but our best estimates show they still greatly outnumber us, with far more reserves they can throw into this fight, using ships far more capable than ours". He glanced down, and for a split second, Halsey could see the enormous weight the man carried on his shoulders. All of human history, all its accomplishments, its culture, its distinctiveness to the universe rested on his shoulders. And for all of the ONI propaganda making him out to have reactor coolant running through his veins, he was ultimately only human.

For a moment, Catherine actually wondered if the Odyssey crew were going to accede to Hoods request right then and there as a subtle wave of twitching and shifting passed through the three members of Stargate Command Team 1, but the General was clearly in control of himself and simply nodded slowly to the request, clearly not one to blindly rush in.

"I do have great sympathy for your situation Admiral" the other said carefully. "But my Government has very strict laws in place regarding the technology of the Stargate program above and beyond any other military technology the US has in service. Even on my own

world, transfers of military technology between other nations in the 'know' of the Stargate program are very tightly controlled and only approved at the highest level".

"You'll have to concede the situation is somewhat different in this situation General" Halsey entered the conversation smoothly. "The other nations on your world are strategic competitors to the United States" Halsey entered the conversation smoothly. "China, Russia, certain European powers I am guessing; ultimately the United States wants to maintain a monopoly on the strategic edge technology derived from the Stargate program gives".

"There is truth in that" Landry conceded with a nod. "But realpolitik aside, there are also practical limitations on developing our technology that will flow through to a much greater degree in your universe, cut off from our logistical base".

"These ... 'limitations' " Halsey asked with a curious tilt of her head, her eyes narrowing slightly behind her glasses, "I presume you are talking about the use of non-terrestrial materials?" She paused long enough for the slightly taken aback General to simply nod before she explained. "I performed a basic analysis on the energy weapon you loaned to James. The metallurgical readings I was getting from what appeared to be its power source were like nothing I've ever seen before. I'm guessing this material ..."

"Naquadah" Carter supplied at a nod from Landry.

"...Naquadah" she nodded, pleased to at least have a word to put to the completely insane substance Cortana had rather drolly declared 'Unobtanium' when the first readings had come in during their attempts to analyse it.. "I am going to guess that the extremely limited infrastructure you have in place to gather and use such materials is primarily because the Stargate is still highly classified? And you are working to keep the reality of the Galaxy a secret from the population at large"

"Essentially ... yes" Carter admitted after a glance at her CO again gave her the okay to keep talking. "We only have limited off-world infrastructure in place to obtain the raw materials. But in our universe it's a common enough material at least outside of Sol, on the order of say Uranium deposits on Earth. But this universe seems to be entirely devoid of it".

"Intriguing" was all she said to the mystery, universal scale differences were fascinating, but more a question for some other time as she switched her attention back to Landry. "Then would you mind terribly if I share some observations with you General?"

"Not at all" the other replied with a slight tilt of the head, clearly wondering where she was going with this whole tangent into Earth politics.

"First, the fact that your Stargate Program remains a secret is highly limiting to your ability to research and develop technology derived from it - especially technology not serving a clear military goal" she started after a moment to gather her thoughts. "Second, while you clearly have access to far more advanced technology, your soldiers" she paused and gestured towards one of the Marines standing stoically next to her Spartans, "are clearly still using standard

issue US equipment circa 2010. Now I don't doubt that it works well enough, but the fact that you have not developed more advanced technology for your infantry - even to the point of using somewhat unwieldy alien weapons" she now gestured at the holster of the man and the very exotic and clearly non-human silver weapon she had noticed almost at once that was sitting there, "tells me you have focused the bulk of your R&D capability onto your space program. If both these assumptions hold true, it can only mean that your capacity for more general technological breakthroughs will be almost nonexistent while the Stargate remains 'black' - even without considering the bottleneck of highly limited materials any real research would require, given the military demand for them. And I doubt that the other nations of the world that, as you say, are 'in' on the secret, are particularly ... thrilled ... about this state of affairs".

Landry did not react immediately, fingering his glass of water for a few long moments before carefully replacing it on the table and leaning forward.

"You are a ... perceptive woman, Doctor Halsey" he complemented, and Halsey gave him an abbreviated nod of thanks in acknowledgement of the complement. "The prevailing opinion of the US Government at this time is that given the strategic situation, the vast bulk of our resources should be focused on the production of 304 class ships - like the Odyssey" Landry gestured to the ship around them. "And while the other nations nominally partnered in the program accept the need for warship production as the number one priority for all our efforts ... I won't deny that there is increasing ... tension" he put it delicately, "from some of the other actors-".

"Meaning the Peoples Republic of China" Valla helpfully added, earning an irritated look from the others around her. "Oh come on, I'm sure she already figured it out-"

"Who is not importunate" Landry cut Valla off with exasperation as he took back the conversation, Valla shooting Daniel a look that said 'What!' while he shot her back a look that told her to just keep her mouth shut, "but the truth is that with the Stargate a secret the other Governments are not in any position to bring significant pressure to change the status quo".

"Leaving a world where the balance of power is steadily shifting in favour of the United States, with the remaining Great Powers on earth growing increasingly unhappy with this situation" she spelt out the situation with a slight smile on her face. "Quite the dilemma".

"Thank you for the analysis Doctor" Landry replied dryly. "I take it you are working towards a point here?"

"I am" she agreed, sweeping her gaze across the group watching her and feeling for all the world like a used spaceship dealer right now as she moved to give her pitch. "Our technology, unlike much of your own, is eminently reproducible from nothing but standard terrestrial materials. While it might not be readily comparable to technology the advanced cultures in your universe use, its robust and effective enough and would neatly solve all the issues I laid out earlier".

"How so?" Landry asked, with what now appeared to be some genuine interest in his voice. Halsey did let a slight smile cross her face as she in turn leaned forward, feeling the opening - feeling that Landry was inviting her into the opening and that he saw where she was going.

"Well let's see" she mused as if in thought, raising a hand and checking off her fingers as she started to throw possibilities off. "Easily produced fusion reactors could eliminate dependency on fossil fuels across your planet in a matter of years. Advanced fuel cell technology will let you harness that energy directly for transportation, personal use, whatever you want really. Simple yet effective, proven and reliable space craft technologies that would let the other nations claim a footprint in space - and if combined with choice components of your more advanced systems, could allow you to build up a fleet to defend your Earth in far less time than any of your estimates dared hope. Advanced medical technology developed in fields your time has barely started to scratch the surface of. Terraforming technology that can eliminate the climate shifts I'm sure your planet is starting to face just as ours did at that point in history..." she let her voice trail off. "And best of all for your superiors? This is technology you can also hand out to other nations and your own, technology that will bring real genuine benefits for every party involved. And if Disclosure does happen, you'll still have a technological base not reliant on strategic materials. And much of it is not terribly far off being able to be made with your own scientific and engineering capacity - meaning you could adapt much of your existing infrastructure outright".

"There also exists the possibility of combining technology" Carter piped in helpfully from the sidelines, some real interest in her voice Halsey thought. "Take the UNSC designs and look to see what we can improve with our own advanced technology and vice versa. For example, if other nations mass produce ships that we can then simply install upgraded weapons or engines into..."

Landry accepted her input without comment, before his gaze shifted finally to focus back on Hood, as she leaned back in her chair.

"Doctor Halsey makes a ... compelling case Admiral, and frankly under the somewhat unique circumstances we find ourselves in, I am willing to discuss technology transfers and assistance with expertise from our people - so long as it's understood that my first priority has to be getting back home" he said.

"Of course" Lord Hood agreed quickly, with the air of a man who would happily pawn Jupiter and Saturn both if it would get him what he wanted. "I'm sure that we can come to mutually acceptable agreements on Colonel Carters time - give me a week and I'll have a staff of thousands of scientists and engineers, AI's and technicians at her disposal. As well as Doctor Halsey of course" he added with a glance across at her.

"Then ... I see no major problems with a technological exchange and us working together" Landry said, and Hood seemed to sag ever so slightly in relief at those words. "We'll need to work out a structure, location and so on to put out people to work though, of course..."

"Sol is the logical location" Halsey suggested to Hood. "Most of the R&D Teams that withdrew from Reach will be there in a week or so and, unlike Reach, it's still undiscovered by the Covenant. We have a secure facility hidden in the Ort cloud with substantial facilities and personnel - I'd suggest re-consolidating everything from Reach there and turning it into R&D Central rather than moving back onto Reach - in case the Covenant do come back in force".

Hood appeared to consider it for a few moments, before he nodded thoughtfully.

"Good idea" he approved, turning to glance at Landry. "The facility is remote, relatively speaking, but its secure and has every possible facility you could ask for with Earth only a short slipspace jump away if we find we need any resources not immediately on hand".

"Sounds good" the General replied with a nod. "When can we get started?"

"Well, it will take a few days for the evacuation transports to Reach Sol with the ONI teams we'll need" Halsey considered. "Plus there is some hardware ONI is working to load up for shipment to Earth that we left behind during the evacuation, that I think may prove useful".

"Draw up a list" Hood ordered her. "I'll have Stanforth prioritize-"

_ 'Bridge to General Landry' _a voice broke in over the Admiral from hidden speakers in the room, causing Hood to pause with a questioning glance at his opposite number, who frowned slightly and pulled a small radio from his pocket.

"This is Landry" the General replied. "Colonel Mitchell, I take it this is important?" he said in a tone that suggested it had _better _be.

_ 'Sir, Marks reports that the Asgard sensor systems just flagged an alert; apparently they detected a spike of the same exotic particles we saw in our hyperspace field when we jumped out of our universe' _.

_That _got a reaction from everyone in the room.

"I set up the sensors to maintain a constant lookout for those readings and trigger an alarm if they detected those readings anywhere in sensor range" Carter explained quickly to the General, pulling her own radio. "Marks, Carter. What are you seeing?"

"_It was a brief Spike Ma'am' _a new voice came in over the radio after a brief pause. _ 'Same frequency range, much lower intensity, but a perfect match. Location triangulates down on the planet. Northern Hemisphere, Eastern Continent' _.

"Patch the data down to us" Landry ordered, turning his chair and standing as the screen activated, the rest of his people doing the same. Taking the cue, both she and Hood stood and moved around the table, the group clustering around the screen as it activated. She hadn't missed the very subtle looks between the _Odysseys_' crew at

this development and knew she had to move quickly to head off any thoughts that they were responsible for trapping them here in the first place.

'_The signature was only briefly recorded before it vanished' _Marks continued as Samantha Carter retrieved a small control from the wall and manipulated the screen, the image localizing and zooming in on the Viery Territories where the Covenant had focused their attack. _'It seemed to be somewhere in the area near the major Covenant incursion on the ground'._

"I've got it Major" Carter replied, tapping the tiny little computer device she had pulled and manipulating the screen, her focus intent on the small screen as she tapped away. "I'm just washing the data through the systems to compensate for our orbital movement during the surge...okay, this should tighten the fix up".

On the screen, Halsey watched in fascination as the display zoomed in on the dot, focusing increasingly towards the edge of the area and the greener parts of the land mass. Her fascination however started to fade as her stomach tightened, as the 'fix' kept narrowing more and more unerringly until it was positioned on a peak that she knew all too well, before the map went wireframe and switched to a 3D topographical view, the white dot coming to rest many kilometres underneath and slightly to the side of the peak of Menachite Mountain. "I'm ... detecting some kind of artificial structure build below ground here" she added, a red cube shading in on the map at the exact location ONI's primary presence on Reach, but distinctly separate from the white dot of the sensor contact.

Halsey shared a significant look with Hood, who clearly looked as stunned as she felt, but none the less he cleared his throat, getting the attention of everyone in the room as he started to explain the history of CASTLE Base that few even in ONI knew.
>Halsey ignored him, knowing the history all too well as she stared at the white dot blinking placidly on the screen, her thoughts whirling as all those pieces of string she had been clutching at finally collated into a ball of twine.<p>

****That same time****

>Unknown Caverns underneath CASTLE BASE

>Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

James Ackerson followed the trail of odd symbols along the stone wall in the glow of his VISOR display. It wasn't the first time he had seen this enigma; a long time ago as _Captain _Ackerson he had been part of the team sent in to examine the traces of an alien presence on Reach, an investigation that had led to nothing but a lava tube with some odd symbols that seemed to fade out if you looked at them too closely.

He had argued long and hard with then CIC-ONI Admiral Luke O'Donnell that they had given up on this trace of an alien presence far too easily, that there _had_ to be more than a line of symbols down here, buried under the rock. His somewhat direct insistence had almost gotten him reassigned to Remote Scanning Outpost Charon, but instead he had managed to slide across into ONI's Wetwork division where he had made quite a name for himself in targeting enemy leadership assets during the Insurrection War.

At least until Halseys freaks had come thundering in and upstaged his efforts.

Still, his undisputed record of excellent field work and his involvement with KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN had gained the attention of one Rear Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky, a rising star in the Wet Work part of ONI that did things NAVSPECWEP were too damn squeamish to do. With his promotion to her staff, he had finally been cleared on the Onyx discovery - a planet with far greater evidence of an ancient alien presence on the fringe of UNSC space. That it was this that had resulted in the reallocation of resources and that he did not need to know any more than that.

He'd accepted her orders - only fools and the crazy lady with the Spartans on her side didn't - but he had never forgotten what lay buried under CASTLE base, somehow knowing in his mind that there was something big down there. And it had taken years as well as data from another alien location to prove it, but as God was his witness, he now knew that buried close by was a key to a door that would ensure the defeat of the Covenant, the predominance of mankind, and the triumphant vindication of everything he had worked for all these years - even undeniable proof of humanities true place in the universe!

Presuming of course, he could find the front door.

Sighing slightly, he once again came to a halt at the same point the Symbols did. He knew far more now than he had all those years ago; the combinations of Squares, Triangles, Bars and Dots that looked quite similar to Covenant cryptography was indeed a language as he had always assumed - and not simply a decorative motif. Now more than ever, he was sure that the whoever this long extinct race was, the Covenant had bootstrapped their own development by finding far more substantial examples of technology or weapons and reverse engineering them. Now that he had the theory and the evidence, so many strange examples of Covenant behaviour suddenly fell into a clear pattern. At Harvest and Jericho, at Sigma Octanus and even here at Reach; all of it was about the Covenant attacking to seize ancient alien artefacts or technology. And from the sheer size of the force the Covenant had thrown at Reach, he would bet every cent in ONI's 'black' budget that the bastards knew that this planet had hidden the motherload. Right under their noses the entire time.

Or at least he hoped so. Because he really needed 'The Motherload' right now.

He didn't know exactly what had happened at ONI while he had been off in the middle of nowhere. Clearly, Parangosky had finally pushed Hood one too many times and he had pushed back.

Hard.

The limited information he had been able to gather without triggering any flags told him that every single key backer of the Admiral in ONI - except him of course- had very clearly been 'promoted' somewhere out of any decision making, all of them surrounded by 'loyal' ONI stooges from HIGHCOM who were no doubt there to stop them doing anything useful - and would no doubt detain him on site if he tried to approach any of these people. Others had simply been 'retired' to

remote villa somewhere on Earth. His dead-drop emergency network was silent outside of the single 'burn' notice he had received, which told him that the UNSC had swept most - if not all - the 'Beta' cells in Section III. His Spartan IIIs, the NOVA program and perhaps most critically of all; the 'Hydra' cell. The few precious tools humanity had that might just let them survive the Covenant's extermination campaign; those squeamish moralistic idiots in HIGHCOM had shut them down. When the Covenant was knocking on Earth's door no less!

Dark some of those projects may have been, but the Navy couldn't defeat the Covenant through clever tactics or attrition, two decades of war had proven that beyond any doubt! Again, he observed that Hood was a great Tactician, a solid Officer ... but he was a poor leader. True leadership he knew all too well, was about being willing to make the tough decisions that destroyed your conscience and burned your soul, because as horrible as some of the calls you made were, they served the greater good

That had been ONI's job. Its purpose. It had been let run free when the Covenant had made their intentions to exterminate mankind clear, in part, because there had to be someone there willing to do the dark things the rest of the UNSC knew had to be done, but just couldn't do.

And ONI had been close.

So damn to their endgame!

'Operation Damocles' had still been in the final planning stages when he had been sent on his mission and highly compartmentalized, but he was one of the few who had been briefed on it. If the Spartan II's had managed to pull off RED FLAG, capturing a Covenant ship and bringing back one of their rarely seen leaders, then the final pieces would have been in place. As much as ONI's mission proposal had stressed capturing a Covenant leader for negotiations, Parangosky didn't think -and he agreed- a race as fanatical as the Covenant would have leaders be likely to have leaders willing to negotiate in good faith with humans in captivity. And that regardless of what the negotiations may have come to, it was even more unlikely that the rest of their Government would honour any agreement made anyway. All evidence said they were on a holy quest that could only end one way - that the will of their Gods would be done and humanity would be destroyed.

But if RED FLAG got Parangosky what she wanted, the Vice Admiral was perfectly willing to spin any tale Halsey and HIGHCOM would buy into to get the resources she needed.

But it was not to be - no, Hood couldn't possibly have blood on that impeccable white uniform of his!

But to hell with him! And to hell with the people now running ONI! He had made a lot of enemies in his life - Catherine Halsey chief among them of course, but there were plenty of others still in ONI, like General Nicolas Strauss - who now appeared to be his boss - who would no doubt dearly love to make him pay for the indignities he had heaped on the man despite his distinctly lesser rank. Hell, Parangosky herself was ruthless to make him the scapegoat if she wished it, and more than smart enough to ensure Hood would have

absolutely unimpeachable evidence to prove it. He hoped she wouldn't do such a thing ... but having worked with the woman for many years he surely wasn't so stupid as to discount the possibility either.

As far as he was concerned, if those fools at HIGHCOM weren't willing to do what was necessary, then he would. He would win this war for the UNSC the only way it could be won. History would be his judge, a history his actions and sacrifices would allow to continue. And no-one. No Hood, not Halsey and her freaks, not even these new humans who had come far too late to turn the tide, would get in his way as he brought Margaret Orlenda Parangosky's dream into reality.

He was her sword - no, he was the sword of humanity - this was bigger than her! And the Covenant would soon, so very soon, rue their ill considered declaration of a war to the knife as the death and misery they had inflicted on humanity would be thus repaid with a single, swift stroke.

In full.

With interest. In a way even ONI's worst nightmares unleashed could never have matched.

His distracted musing was cut off by the sound of footsteps approaching. He turned in the direction of the noise coming down the poorly lit tunnel and waited for the other to enter the light source, already able to tell from the very non-military footsteps that it had to be Chalmers, the ONI specialist and leader of the tech team Parangosky had assigned to him. She was competent enough and, most important, was utterly loyal to his mission - not that he had bothered to tell her his chain of command had become slightly compromised. But like him, she was a true believer in their work, and thus ideal for his purposes ... even if she was no Catherine Halsey.

"Report".

"The sensors are all in place" the Scientist replied with a nervous nod - clearly the awe and fascination she had experienced in the Jericho system at what they had found had been replaced with fear and caution as she realized just how deep this rabbit hole was going and just where it led. "So far we're not getting anything but normal background radiation from the general area Araquiel pointed us to look towards".

"But this is the closest point in this Lava Tube to the estimated location?" he asked, to be sure, pointing at the blue mosaic of symbols that spiralled away into nothing in front of them.

"Oh, without question" the other nodded quickly, checking a tiny computer that was networked through a string of wireless repeaters back into the CASTLE systems and Araquiel itself. "Although these Lava tunnels do go on for quite an extended distance, we might need to survey-"

"No" Ackerson shook his head firmly, his attention focused on what could only be the front door. "What we're looking for is here - it has to be here".

As they regarded the wall together, a figure materialized next to them in silence, this one easily a foot taller than either of them and wearing Semi-Powered Combat armour - the heavy duty variant of standard issue SPI armour that dropped the adaptive camouflage for a heavier armour layer. Yet even without stealth technology, the Spartan had moved so silently through the darkness that it had been only the readout of his helmets motion tracker that had betrayed her presence - their skill at moving undetected sometimes terrified even him.

"Reporting as ordered Colonel" the other announced as she came to a halt, causing Chalmers to jump in startled surprise and drop something that looked expensive.

"Ah, Petty Officer, good" he nodded at the other as the irritated Chalmers got herself back under control, bending down to retrieve the scanner and get back to work. "I was wondering if you might try knocking on the front door and see what happens".
>It was logical enough thing to try he had agreed after Chalmers had suggested it. After all, it had been this Spartan whose mere touch had opened the door to the alien complex in the Jericho system...<p>

Kerry-303 nodded and stepped up to where the line of symbols twisted and turned into the whirlpool of markings across the wall, triggering her own suits lights to bring the wall under better illumination, before reaching out and cautiously touching the wall.

Ackerson was disappointed, but not entirely surprised, when nothing happened. The other pressed more firmly, then with both hands, carefully feeling her way around the trace of symbols as if looking for any kind of hidden latch or control, but nothing was happening and after a minute he sighed slightly.

"Well it was worth a try" he shrugged. "We'll bring up the deep scanners and try to map through this area, then we'll break out the fusion cutters and try to bore in from the side, see what we're dealing with here. We'll start some pilot holes and try to get some fibre-optics in."

"Are you sure that's wise Sir?" Chalmers asked with a look of pain on her face at the idea of such wanton destruction. "There are other possibilities-"

"ONI tried all those other non-destructive 'possibilities' for years Doctor" he shook his head without hesitation, watching as the Spartan none the less continued to methodically probe the wall, even taking off her right gauntlet for better sensitivity as she ran her fingers around the symbols seemingly indistinguishable from the granite matrix of the rock. "No, the time for half measures is over, if we can't-"

He broke off as the young Spartan ahead of him yelped suddenly and drew her hand back with the blurred speed common to all the super soldiers after their augmentations. "Petty Officer?" he frowned.

"Nothing Sir" the other said, clear embarrassment at her reaction in front of her CO leaking into her worlds as she glanced at her hand. "I just cut myself - very sharp edge on these symbols".

"My fault, I should have warned you about that" he replied with an annoyed frown - but one directed at himself for forgetting that detail. All ONI examination of these symbols had been conducted wearing class-A HAZMAT suits with reinforced gloves - ONI's paranoia had been dialled up to 11 in their first examination of a genuine alien trace and laser-scan measurements of the markings had quickly determined that they held an almost perfectly sharp edge that had dissuaded anyone from touching them with anything but the greatest of care. "Tell the rest of the techs to bring up..." his voice cut off as the Spartan suddenly snapped her weapon up and stepped back from the door, Chalmers spluttering a startled exclamation a moment later.

Whirling around, he saw to his amazement that the symbols seemed to now be fluctuating, wavering like a mirage of heat waves in the distance did on a hot day...

"Point Delta" the Spartan barked over TEAMCOM as she carefully edged away from the wall with her rifle pointed unerringly at it, Ackerson backing up with her - and none too gently taking the arm of Doctor Chalmers and forcing her back as she started to move excitedly _towards _the door, "we have activity - we need backup".

Acknowledgement lights flashed on his VISOR display, but Ackerson didn't really notice, his focus entirely on the symbols inside the rock, which seemed to be becoming indistinct...

"Kill the lights" he ordered on a sudden realisation. The Spartan at once killed her 20 Million Candlepower helmet lights and he flicked off the light on his MA5K carbine. Chalmers took a moment longer, but the flood lights soon flicked off as she hurriedly walked over and killed them by the expedience of yanking their power cord from the portable fusion reactor set up here.

In the sudden darkness, his observation was confirmed; the symbols were now starting to _glow_. Not just the mosaic where Kerry had woken whatever technology had responded to her touch, but the trail glow was spreading, moving faster and faster down the line of symbols in the wall that swung around the corner of the lava tube and out of sight. It was a warm white glow, almost seeming to be more natural, more _real _than the powerful and artificial lights that they had brought with them and it illuminated the tunnel in a way the cracked chemical sticks every fifty meters or so didn't come close to. Directly in front of them however, the cluster of symbols seemed to glow 'hotter', turning a cherry red, than orange as if they were metal being superheated, an impression helped along by the way the perfectly sharp edges started to lose integrity, as if they were melting...

"Temperature readout?" he asked Chalmers, letting her go now that he was sure she would stay put.

The Doctor pulled a small device from her belt that looked almost like a pistol, with a small video display that she flicked on and waved at the wall ... before frowning, pressing some buttons and waving it again as the symbols seemed to start 'melting' and flowing like liquid metal into one large orange blob.

"Would it surprise you if I said that the wall is showing as exactly the same temperature as it was give minutes ago?" she asked in an almost jaded tone, as if yet another impossibility for her had become the norm. "I'm not detecting any heat at all. I'd put money on this being more of that 'Solidified Light' technology we saw on Jericho".

"Incredible camouflage" he muttered, shaking his head. No wonder the teams trying to take samples of the wall hadn't been able to dent it with the basic tools ONI had allowed to be used. Even as he watched, what had been the six meter wide mosaic of symbols continued to contract into a smaller and smaller area of orange light, as if was a liquid draining away into an invisible hole somewhere, the rocky walls smoothing out as the light consolidated into a polished wall of the exact same texture colouring as the walls of the facility in the Jericho system.

The sound of armoured boots on rock broke through his focus and he tore his gaze away to look up the tunnel - now well lit up by the symbols in the rock - to see a pair of Spartans tagged as Michael and Shin on his HUD come around the sharp turn of the passage, clearly in 'Advance to Contact mode' as they hugged the walls and swept the passage with their weapons, the rest of the team following moments later as they cleared them to move up. Waving them up with a gesture that told them to be ready but keep weapons tight, he turned back to the activity in front of him and saw that what had been the mosaic of symbols had consolidated down to a single oversized symbol, the exact same symbol he recognized from Jericho. A large circle with a smaller circle embedded inside it at the apex, with a single line from that inner circles base connecting it to the base of the larger circle.

Nothing else happened as they all stood there silently watching, even as the nine commandos skidded to a halt, falling in with perfectly smooth motions to form a firing line next to Kerry, between the glowing doorway and the two non Spartan personnel.

"Sir, are you okay?" the Team leader asked.

"I'm better than okay Petty Officer" Ackerson snorted, breaking his normally military perfect attitude as the feelings of sheer exhalation threatened to overwhelm him. "I'm _right_".

The other clearly didn't know what to say to _that_, and instead settled for falling back on his training, pointing his shotgun at the symbol now glowing softly on the wall - but Ackerson took a second to close his eyes and try to push past his emotion. There would be time to gloat later, right now he needed to keep his head cool and in control.

"Alright, what now?" he asked Chalmers.

"Uh, well it looks like whatever activity there was has ... finished" the other observed somewhat lamely, gesturing the glowing orange symbol on the door. "If that is a door, well... given what happened last time..."

"Spartan" Ackerson gestured towards the symbol, understanding her meaning.

Kerry-303 nodded and stepped out of the firing line, the soldiers flanking her shifting their formation wider into a slightly curved line as she moved up. Letting her rifle hang from its tactical sling, she pulled her oversized M6D 'Spartan' pistol with her left hand, as she moved forward, reaching out with her still uncovered right and carefully pressed her palm against the glowing symbol as if it was a hand scanner, firmly and without flinching.

Almost at once, the symbol vanished, but the glowing symbols along the tunnel wall exploded into luminescence. Chalmers yelled and spun away, covering her face as the illumination flooded the tunnel, the military light filters in both Ackersons and the Spartans helmets compensating automatically, but still wiping out almost any detail-

And then the light dropped back to normal.

The light filter reset itself, and Ackerson couldn't help but grin behind his visor as he saw that the 'door' had vanished and a corridor was now open for them into the alien facility. It was illuminated with the same blue and green light running 'through' the patterns 'embedded' into the floor and walls of the trapezoidal passage, which curved out of sight to the right, down into the depths of the planet.

"Tech team, report to Point Delta" he ordered over his COM as he turned away and retrieved his field backpack from where he had put it down, glancing at Chalmers who seemed unharmed from the light surge and busy studying some equipment she had been carrying around on one of the Mongoose ATV's stored at the vehicle farm just under Castle Base. "Fire Teams One and Two, set up a full perimeter from point Bravo to point Delta. Fire team three, you're point guard here, four, you're with me. Get that damn drone unpacked and send it in to start a recon sweep."

"Colonel" Chalmers said urgently as he settled the weight of his pack on his shoulders, the distant noise of the Mongooses and Hogs getting underway echoing down the maze of tubes from not too far away. "My equipment detected another of those radiation spikes when the door opened".

"Any danger?" he asked with a frown as he retrieved his rifle, glancing at the Spartans as they quickly unpacked the drone from its quick-use container and got it ready for launch.

'No, its non-ionising, looks like some kind of neutrino surge, but ... wait" she frowned, pressing her earpiece in closer as the drones turbines started up with an annoying buzzing sound. "Araquiel says he caught it too, the same radiation surge he logged yesterday, but much lower intensity. Happened right when that flash of light did".

"Then we better get moving" he said, checking the location of the Tech Team on his local map through the transponders they had strung up on the way down and willing them to hurry up. "Tell the tech team to get here fast and make sure you're ready to go when they do arrive. Things have been put in motion now, that cannot be stopped, the first stage of an avalanche building upon itself. We have no choice but to move with it now, to try to keep up" he said as he settled the pack onto his back, watching as the Spartans launched their tiny HAMMERHEAD mini-drone into the alien base, its ultrasonic

sensors getting to work starting to sketch in a map on his HUD as it vanished down the corridor.

_And whatever tries to get in the way of the avalanche, God have mercy on you because _I_ will not_.

Lifting his hand, he gestured to the door, and the five Spartans of Team Four fell into escort formation, as he pressed out of the tunnel and into the Alien base.

7. Chapter 7

****So its fanfic time.****

>Like over a year since an update, I think this deserves one.

****The good news is that I'm in a crazy writing zone right now. The second half of this chapter, which will pretty much be an exclusive SG1 POV, hopefully won't take anywhere near this long.****

****I'll also be updating, hopefully, OMWF in the next month or two. As soon as I can find a word in a dictionary that describes the sheer level of anger and rage that Gendo will be in at the end of it - I'm honestly not sure I'm quite there yet, despite being 3/4 of the way through writing the chapter. 'Hatfucking fury' comes close, but its not ****_quite_**** there...****

****I've also posted another new fanfic under a different account name. Don't shoot me, it was that fanfic that caused me to go into a hyperdrive in writing stuff. For some insane reason I've finally figured that I write a lot faster when I'm writing a LOT of fanfics rather than when I limit myself and only write like 1.****

****Go figure?****

****Anyway, on with Chapter 5 part 1! These two Chapters will conclude the Reach arc, after which we'll have a bit of a short timeskip and several changes of venue.****

****As always, mucho thanks to Spartan303 for keeping me focused and offering his expertise to someone who has never even held a gun in his life****

*** * ***

><p>Chapter 5. With your shield &€|or on it.

****12:15 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

>Unknown Caverns underneath CASTLE BASE

>Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

Deep under the surface of Reach, Colonel James Ackerson took a step forward. In doing so, he crossed the vaguely defined line that separated the ancient lava tunnels from the equally ancient alien base hidden on this world for so very long.

Hidden no longer.

His gait was that of an elite soldier who had seen death and told it to come back later on more than one occasion, but none the less it was only an absolute iron discipline that forestalled the Colonel thrusting a fist into the air in triumph as he crossed the threshold. True there was only his tech team and two of his four fire teams of Spartans present at this historic moment, but none of them would be at all impressed by their CO indulging in theatrics so he kept his mouth shut and kept moving, limiting himself to the smallest smile behind his tinted Visor as he pressed onward.

"The structural features match those of the base back in the Jericho system" Doctor Chalmers, the leader of his Tech Team spoke up, breaking the silence as she followed him past the threshold. Unlike the Soldiers, the civilian didn't bother to hide her awe and excitement as she panned a camera around; documenting the next stage in the greatest archaeological find in the history of mankind. Her portable scanner was bulkier than the standard mission recording units used by UEG military personnel, able to 'see' most of the EM spectrum and equipped with Tri-D lenses that would allow a detailed holographic recreation to be made in real time when streamed to a supporting AI, or, stored for later analysis work. "All the way down to the angles and dimensions â€" it's a perfect match. Colonel, this can only be the work of the same species behind the facility on the moon".

"Clearly" Ackerson agreed dryly, rolling his eyes slightly at the Doctors Habit of stating the blindingly obvious, shooting a hand signal at a quintet of his men waiting patiently were the passage ahead twisted sharply off to the right. Unleashed by his gesture the five Spartans of his point team started moving at once, their transponder blips shooting off down the sketchy map his suits systems had pieced together from the recon drone they had sent through earlier. According to the drone, this new section of the corridor descended with a relatively gentle gradient for another five hundred meters deeper into Reach, seemingly 'hugging' the outer wall of a massive chamber until it terminated in what appeared to be a cross corridor into said chamber.

He had considered holding their entire group together in case they ran into something that needed a response from the entire team but had decided to err on the side of caution, sending the Spartans in on ahead of the main body to sweep the long passage. Standard UNSC doctrine in this kind of close-quarters recon dictated that the lead fire team would 'pull' the rest of the group forward at their own pace rather than be 'pushed' by the main body following too close behind; to ensure that the point team had sufficient time to sweep for any hostile presence. Or to be brutally honest, to let them trip any defenses or security systems hidden too well to be detected, sparing the main body their effects. And while five Spartans would be an unfortunate and expensive loss if they did trip such a system, frankly he had come too far and sacrificed too much to risk death at the hands of some ancient defense system.

The Spartan IIIs were ultimately, as always, expendable for this operation.

He was not.

"Team One, Team Two, SITREP and COM check" he ordered, switching

channels as he strode around the corner the Spartans had vanished around. His weapon was shouldered and at the ready, but he was unsurprised to find nothing of any interest, just the slightly wider passage descending further into Reach. So quickly were the Spartan scouts making their sweep that they were already out of sight behind the curve of the passageway and so he stepped up his pace slightly as he started his own descent, even as the Spartans watching his back checked in.

"_Team One â€" Point Alpha_" the first of the two Spartan teams outside the Alien base reported in. Point Alpha was situated just back from the very foundations of CASTLE Base, nominally guarding their only way in or out of the caverns as well as their hard line into the CASTLE Base systems. "_Position is secure, no activity â€" signal strength five by_".

"_Team_ _Two â€" Point Charlie_" the second team leader checked in moments later from _their_ position, entrenched just outside the entrance to the alien complex, guarding the vehicles they had been forced to leave there. "_Position is secure, no activity â€" signal strength five by_".

"Good" he answered as he led his own team deeper at a brisk pace, the rumble of the carts being pulled along behind him stacked with the tech teams gear oddly muted over the otherwise rock hard floor as they trundled along. "Araquel, you still have an uplink?"

"_But of course Colonel_" the AI rumbled in his ear - and Ackerson couldn't help but let his smirk return for a moment at the tone of almost greedy anticipation. The study of the suspected Alien presence in these caverns was the original purpose of CASTLE base. Yet with the shutdown of KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN decades ago, knowledge of the alien presence had been restricted to the very highest levels of ONI and FLEETCOM â€| but the procession of Smart AI's that had been brought in to serve the base were also in the loop - if only to monitor the extensive array of automated sensors and anti-intrusion devices ONI had seeded throughout the tunnels.

For a Smart AI, knowing that one of the greatest mysteries in human history was sitting right under the base yet not being able to _do_ _anything_ about it was almost like having an itch they could never scratch â€| for their entire life. So it was unsurprising that the AI was sounding a little excited at finally getting some answers.

Frankly, he would have vastly preferred to bring the AI with him lest their communications links be cut off as they went deeper. But outside of Halsey's new Mark Five MJOLNIR technology there wasn't really any combat viable yet mobile platform available to deploy an AI like Araquel in the field. He needed to be in and out as quickly as possible and he certainly didn't want to waste time setting up and dismantling any more equipment than he absolutely needed to.

"_All resources of this base remain at your command_" the AI continued over his musing. "_Curiously, your signal strength is not degrading as you move deeper â€" in fact neither has the first team of Spartans transponders. I would conjecture that there may something conveying your signals back to the entranceway and retransmitting them â€" possibly as a passive function of the passageways themselves_. _But if so, it doesn't mean this system could not be

turned off at some point"._

"Let's hope it stays that way" he acknowledged as he continued to stroll down the gleaming passage, keeping one eye on a tactical map tracking the positions of all his people in real time â€" most especially his point team as it approached where the drone had stopped at the end of this long corridor. "Anything new starside?"

"_Unclear_" the voice of the AI replied after a moment. "_The meeting on board the trans-universal human ship can only be inferred and not observed as the Fleet has made a routine post-battle switch to a new encryption scheme â€" and all upcoming codes in the CASTLE database were hard-purged by ONI during the evacuation. However given the lack of clear hostile activity, the first order probability is that Admiral Hood is making progress in negotiations with the newcomers_".

"Good â€" the longer everyone keeps watching _that_, the more time we have down here" he grunted, meaning every word. "Keep me alerted if anything changes. Any sign of reaction to the radiation pulse from down here?"

"_Nothing on the few official channels I have access to_" the AI replied. "_But it is unlikely anyone could have detected the energy signatures, not without the specialized hardware I have down here. I cannot of course speculate on the interlopers technological capabilities_".

"Keep monitoring" he ordered â€" as if he could give any other order! "Let me know the second you see a change in status from _anything_ _that might concern us".

The AI acknowledged his orders with a beep before closing the channel, Ackerson suppressing a sigh as his gleeful anticipation gave way to an impatience that only seemed to build with every step he took down this rabbit hole. He had not shared the full extent of what they had discovered in the Jericho system with Araquel â€"the AI understood the need for compartmentalization and wouldn't be offended if it found out laterâ€" beyond the fact that he had confirmed the existence of a non-Covenant alien vector with probable latchkey level potential on Reach.

And frankly even that label, the _highest_ level of classification for non-human technology vectors, was underselling what he had stumbled into. The fate of mankind was now sitting squarely on _his_ shoulders â€" and despite the crushing weight, he _relished_ the moment â€" he _lived_ in the moment. It was as if since he had walked across that fantastic, impossible bridge of light in the Jericho system, his fate and the fate of mankind had been made one in the same â€" as if every part of his life had simply been preparation for this final mission â€" this final _destiny_.

So in silence, he led his team at a brisk pace down the passage, half a kilometer of mindless marching causing his thoughts to drift back to the Jericho system, the two complexes blurring in his mind as he walked through one in reality and the other in his mind...

Because it always came back to that insane light bridge. That â€" _impossible_ light bridge.

Up until then, everything he had seen had been astonishing, but quantifiable in some vague way. But walking across a seemingly bottomless pit using a bridge made out of something that every single sensor they had insisted was nothing but ordinary light

The impossible sight had stirred something inside him. Granted, he had remained professional enough to insist that the Spartan who had crossed first with a thruster pack in case the bridge failed hook up a safety line for everyone else to hook onto yet despite the fact that he knew he should have felt terribly uneasy at the sheer drop and been questioning how trustworthy such ancient technology could be, the only thing running through his mind was a sense of wonder he had thought long destroyed by countless battles across countless worlds. The angular lines and triangular geometry of the central tower that brooded over the massive cavern was both captivating and oddly familiar in some maddening way and it had drawn him in like a siren.

It had only sharpened the sense of betrayal as the team had crossed the bridge, finding in front of them a honeycomb of open chambers and rooms. Dozens of rooms, a half dozen large chambers, all constructed of perfectly consistent triangular and rectangular patterns that were seemingly random, yet fit together somehow into a unified whole

With absolutely nothing of any interest to be found anywhere.

It was oddly empty. Completely blank walls and rooms. The previously omnipresent traces of light and energy that had flowed through the floors and walls on the far side of the bridge were missing, replaced by surfaces no more interesting than a concrete basement in an abandoned office block on Earth.

The transition from the wonder of the light bridge to the empty mundane was slightly jarring, but he hid his disappointment and led a team up the very prominent flight of stairs in front of the light bridge landing to the top of the tower, certain that surely at the very focus of this entire place there had to be something

And this time, he was not disappointed.

The top of the tower was not a flat surface as he had expected. In fact it was a sunken indent into the tower, formed by a dozen descending ring like tiers several meters wide, each offset from the previous one to form a natural amphitheatre of sorts. The descending tiers were constructed out of the same translucent material they had encountered on the other side of the light bridge, pulses of energy seeming to randomly jump up and down from tier to tier along wildly complex patterns of circuit-like lines embedded into the surface.

The 'stage' like disk that was the bottom most level of the amphitheatre was not constructed out of this material but seemed to be something akin to glass, flawlessly transparent and showing the interior of the 'tower' was in fact hollow. But Ackerson barely noticed that fact, his eyes locked onto what was situated in the precise middle of that glass floor, situated directly under the centre of the vast dome above them.

A pedestal.

Much like the one Kerry-303 had stumbled onto at the doorway into this entire facility but this one was both taller and had some kind of wedge shaped holographic screen floating directly above it, with all manner of alien text and symbols scrolling slowly across it.

"Bingo" he said in a tone of quiet satisfaction as his eyes locked onto what could only be a computer interface of some kind "and from its position, he guessed a very important one. Letting the smile that had started to fade with the completely empty areas under them return in full force, he started forward, dropping easily from tier to tier as his Spartan escort fanned out around the upper tier into a standard 360 degree defensive formation. Behind him, the tech team started working their equipment up the stairs from the light bridge, no doubt annoyed by the fact that the Spartans with their augmented strength were not lending a hand "but equally disinclined to complain directly to ONIs amoral killing machines about that fact. Doctor Chalmers, the leader of the technicians was the first to crest the 'hill' and at the sight of the gleaming tiers of light and pedestal sitting like a brooding monolith in the middle of it all, she was off, dignity forgotten as she skidded down the tiers rapidly to join him.

"Well that certainly looks like some kind of control panel or computer interface" the Doctor observed as she skidded to a halt next to him, starrng in unabashed excitement at the display placidly hovering above the pedestal, focused entirely on the strange markings projected there. "It's right under the middle of the dome, this has to be the focus of the " huh " now that is curious."

"What is curious?" he asked, controlling his urge to snap at the very non-military manner of the Doctor with some effort. He had learned the hard way that the more leeway he gave her the better results she gave him in turn, although given how easily she could be distracted if he turned his attention from her for even half a second

"The symbols" she stated, pointing at the odd shapes and squiggles on the screen. "Remind you of anything?"

He frowned as he followed her gesture, studying the shapes on the screen, ignoring the arrival of the technicians behind him as they dragged their gear down and started to laborious processing of unpacking it. The symbols were not a match for the symbols under CASTLE base he had seen a long time, nor did it look like anything he had seen inside the base to this point-

Then it hit him.

"Covenant Symbols" he observed, surprise laced through his voice as he stepped forward to get a better look, depolarizing his headset to get a clear view at the suddenly half recognizable shapes. "These look just like some of the symbols on Covenant computer interfaces. Just "

"Cleaner" Chalmers found the word he was looking for. "Almost simple. Uncluttered perhaps?"

"Do you think the Covenant co-opted an alien language?" a technician questioned from behind them as she started unfolding and unpacking a field workstation. Lightweight, but packed with bleeding edge ONI technology backwards engineered from Covenant computer systems, the various workstations, data cores and ancillary systems would have brought the Navy a fighter squadron in pure dollar value, but their value couldn't be measured in raw credits. Similar capability with the more standard gear widely available in the UEG would have taken days to bring online with a team this small â€| and they probably didn't have anything like that amount of time to waste.

"Perhaps â€" or perhaps this all belonged to a precursor to the Covenant we know, an earlier stage of one of their species civilizations?" another tech offered. "Possibly the Elites or the so-called Prophets we keep hearing about?"

"Well why don't we plug in and find out?" Chalmers said, stepping around him without warning, and moving towards the screenâ€|

He whirled in alarm, ready to reach out and yank her back before she started pressing buttons in her almost childlike excitement, but held off as he saw that she was just squatting down to examine the pedestal more closely.

"What is it?" he asked warily, moving to join her, but holding himself ready to pull her away if she looked like she was about to start pushing buttons. God knows eggheads like her could get downright punchy if you didn't keep an eye on them.

"This" she pointed with genuine excitement at what looked like a small slot or opening in the top of the front face of the pedestal. "Do you recognize it?"

Ackerson glanced down, raising his weapon and playing its underslung flashlight over the slot-

"Is that a Covenant data port?" he asked - with no small amount of surprise as he crouched down to take a closer look.

"I'm positive that's exactly what it is" Chalmers agreed, nodding over her shoulder at him before taking a moment to shoo away the gaggle of technicians crowding behind her trying to get a closer look at the gleaming alien control interface. "More evidence this base may have been built by a splinter faction of the Covenant or, more likely, they reverse engineered this technology from another race. Which is good news for us because it means we should be able to tie Harpy into this system using our existing adaptors and protocols for Covenant computer technology".

"Can â€| we just patch one of our AI's into a completely alien system like that?" Ackerson asked, feeling well outside his element here as he stepped back slightly to regard the pedestal and control panel hovering unattached above it somewhat dubiously. "Isn't that impossible? Apples and oranges and all that?"

He may have loathed Catherine Halsey as a person, but he respected her expertise and abilities as second to none when it came to such matters â€" she wasn't still Chief Scientist with ONI because Parangosky liked her after all. And yet for all that, he knew it had taken her team years to build up the UNSCs ability to interface

with Covenant computer technology to their current level.

"If this tech is built on the same architecture as Covenant systems â€¦ it should be possible" Chalmers nodded â€¦ although despite the confidence of her words, Ackerson noted that her body language was far more uncertain, but she appeared to shake it off. "Harpy is loaded down with every byte of hacking and analysis software ONI has developed to get into Covenant systems â€" so if there is a fundamental similarity â€¦ I'd say yes, at the very least we should get some data to jump start our analysis work".

Ackerson considered their situation. Certainly, there were risks with plugging their AI into a completely alien computer system. Harpy, their 'Smart AI', had been lugged down here to provide the computer 'muscle' for their teams analysis work. Interfacing it directly with some kind of alien systems had never been in the mission brief â€" and he knew exactly what his Boss would have said if he had asked her opinion of taking such a step.

But he was the field commander on site. ONI gave great latitude to local commanders making mission critical decisions - so long as they were prepared to accept the consequences if things went south â€¦ so it ultimately came down to his best judgment.

Pausing for a moment, his gaze once more took in the gigantic structure around them, a certainty that the fate of humanity itself might rest on what actions he took here today rising up once more â€¦ yet it was tempered by the questions no-one had dared ask out loud as yet.

Where were the people who built this place?

Had they all died out long ago, leaving abandoned facilities scattered across the Galaxy like ruined outposts dotting Europe thousands of years ago after Rome fell? Or were they still alive, simply no longer interested in this part of the universe meaning this impressive complex was little more than the equivalent of one of the UNSCs automated slipspace listening posts?

The truth was they knew nothing. All the casual showings of technology, as if toying with the fundamental rules of matter and energy were as normal to these people as flipping a light switch was to him made him feel his team were as far out of their depth as a bunch of Neanderthals would be poking around a fusion reactor. But to be brutally honest, they didn't have the time to play it safe anymore. Not with the Covenant increasingly looking ready to burst through Earths final defensive lines and gut the UNSC from the inside out.

Delaying or hesitating now could cost them dearly.

Could cost humanity everything.

>And in the face of that threat, could any level of risk really be considered unacceptable?<p>

"Okay Doctor. Patch in the AI" he nodded his permission. "But" he added before she had taken more than a step, halting her in place with the warning in his voice, "make damn sure that you're ready to pull the plug if this goes south".

The other nodded nervously, but none the less moved quickly to take charge of the tech team, getting the dozen personnel working on the portable fusion plant and datacores the AI would need. Ackerson stayed out of their way, marshalling his patience by making a sweep around the rim of the raised platform, gazing out at the massive complex carved into the moon long before humanity had even considered taking steps into the stars, wondering at who they had been and what had happened to them. Had they too met a power as far beyond them as humanity had with the Covenant? Or was all this history of the Covenant? A splinter faction of some kind perhaps?

The questions without answers rolled around his head and gave him no peace. He was never one to second guess himself, but the sheer enormity of what he was playing with, what he was rushing into with so many key questions unanswered and unknown â€|

"Okay, connection is good" Chalmers called out suddenly, snapping his attention back from his brooding study of the vast dark emptiness around them. Moving back through the perimeter of Spartans quickly, he joined the technicians at the array of screens, keyboards and workstations hastily set up, cables strewn everywhere over the perfectly clear floor. He watched as Chalmers took a long fiber optic cable and spooled it out over to the alien pedestal, before attaching an adaptor he recognized as a Covenant data port interface to the end of the cable. She did seem to hesitate for a split second as if she too realized the enormity of the risks, but steeled herself and with great care knelt down, slotting the other end of the cable into the port on the pedestal.

"Connection established" one of the techs announced, his screen lighting up with reams of computer data that Ackerson was completely unable to understand. "Hardware connections match to Covenant standard form factors".

"Confirm" another called. "No irregularities detected in the physical connection".

"Okay" Chalmers nodded, visibly seeming to take a breath as she stood and walked back to the other end of the cable, a square cube of plastic and metal about a meter high and half a meter in width and length, tapping several buttons along its top edge.
"Harpy?"

"Yesssss?" a sibilant whisper came over their COM line and behind his visor, Ackerson rolled his eyes at the holographic avatar that swirled into being above the cube in a whirlwind of pixels. Like oh so many of ONI's AI, 'Harpy' had chosen a somewhat sinister looking avatar, this one a ghostly vaguely human form made of a burning white 'mist' that was constantly boiling off into nothing, with two bright blue eyes set on an otherwise featureless, angular 'face'. Clearly it was a choice meant to intimidate the people who came into contact with it â€| but _he_ worked for a woman who he had seen order entire continents turned into radioactive wastelands with as much compunction as any other person might order dinner.

He was not _easily_ intimidated.

Still, the indisputably useful thing about AIs was their speed. Already, Harpy would have silently and wirelessly polled their mission logs and conversations; catching up with everything that had

happened between his last activation and now within a matter of milliseconds. Which meant it knew exactly what it had been brought online to do and needed only the order to begin to get started.

And she gave it

"Commence first level connection"

"By your will Doctor Chalmers" it sibilantly acquiesced with a bow before turning to face the alien console, an odd grid like display of icons materializing in front of it that it reached up and tapped, causing reams of data to start flowing into little sub windows, each moving forward or backwards or even sideways independent of each other, the AI gesturing like a conductor leading an orchestra as it started to make its connections. Ackerson once again rolled his eyes; the AI certainly didn't need to show its 'work' like this, pegging this AI as one of those that enjoyed showing off in front of its flesh and blood masters. It was not an uncommon trait, albeit one more common in Smart AIs than the Dumb AIs he usually worked with.

As with most issues revolving around individual eccentricity, he didn't particularly care â€| so long as it got results.

And it did.

"I'm in" the AI said moments later. "Hardware layer connection established using standard Covenant protocols".

"Any sign of counter-intrusion response?" Chalmers asked anxiously.

"None" the AI replied flatly, waving a hand briefly and causing a ripple of activity to pass through the grid in front of it. "Although it appears that the Covenant protocols do not provide answers to all of the feedback the hardware is giving â€| but I do have a standard Covenant-style entry header from the alien systems in response to my connection".

Chalmers looked at him and he understood the unasked question. This was the go-no go point to back out. He gave her a slight nod and she in turn turned back to face the AI.

"Commence second level connection".

"Processing" the other hissed and the grid of strange symbols seemed to unfold and expand on itself, data now flowing in three dimensions, curving around the AI until it was encased in a holotank of data. "Establishing interface matrix. Hold â€| confirm. This is not a Covenant computer system. There are similarities, at least on the surface â€| but there is far more to this. Far moreâ€|"

"Be specific. What do you mean far more?" he demanded, fighting to keep his exasperation at the vague comments out of his voice.

"I have established a connection into their systems â€" but it is highly limited" the AI almost sighed back at him, clearly unhappy with having to give a running commentary on its work, no matter how few of its cycles it took up doing so. "A crude analogy would be knowing the English alphabet with a bare minimum of syntax and

structure rules "then being asked to translate a document from 15th century English into modern German. I am having to 'make it up as I go', to coin a useful human phrase " ah" it nodded and raised one claw like appendage, snapping its fingers with a crack. The gesture may have been pure ego " no matter how much the AI might deny it had one - but none the less the holographic display above the pedestal blinked, vanished and was replaced a moment later by a larger 3D image that could only have been a map of this facility.

Ackerson raised an eyebrow as he stepped out from behind the technicians to take a closer look, noting that what could only be the chamber they were in took up barely a third of the total volume, with an extensive labyrinth plunging into the depths of the moon below them and a spider web of passages just under the surface stretching for many kilometers in all directions.

"Well that qualifies as progress" he allowed as the technicians behind him started chattering in excitement at the data starting to flow through to their systems from the AI as it worked to analyse, translate, categorize and sort. "Can you qualify the general purpose of this installation yet?"

There was no response.

Annoyed he turned back to face the holographic avatar. The AI was clearly engrossed in its work, scores more data points opening around its hologram until it looked almost buried in them, spinning orbs of alien text arcing through the air from one to the other with blinding speed as it worked, seemingly absorbed in a task with all of its concentration.

"Harpy, what is it?" he asked, somewhat more forcefully.

"There is " something odd here" it replied hesitantly. Ackerson frowned at the highly vague answer, then took a deliberate step closer towards the AI's data core. Unsurprisingly for something as sensitive an ONI AI, there were no less than three independent mechanisms that would terminate it and destroy all data installed on the field equipment. And if simply pulling its plug to the alien systems didn't work in the event of something going terribly wrong, he would not hesitate to use them. "I'm mapping the local network topography, but I was just pinged from a node with a handshake signal".

"So? What's odd about that?" Chalmers asked from her console as she studied the alien data stream with every sign of childish excitement.

"Because it's using a UNSC handshake protocol Doctor".

"It's WHAT?" Chalmers spluttered, her helmet snapping up and a clear expression of shock on her face as she stared at the AI. "That's " that's impossible!"

"Yet, it is so" the AI replied, sounding almost insulted that the little human dared to question its analysis of the situation. "In fact, it looks like it is the gateway to the core network of this base; attempting connection"

James Ackerson immediately opened his mouth to order the AI to wait. His paranoid Office of Naval Intelligence mind was flashing all manner of alarms at this alien system suddenly waving a UNSC welcome mat in their face so readily. But the human mind only worked at a speed of tens of milliseconds compared to the micro and nanosecond scale timeframes of AIs and by the time he had even started to _think_ about objecting, it was far too late.

Every alarm built into every one of the workstations went off at the same time, the technicians not far behind as they started yelling and shouting as they hammered at their keyboards and screens as the situation went from controlled professionalism to uncontrolled chaos almost in the blink of an eye as the holographic data streams went nuts.

"Network intrusion detected in nodes two through seven, eight, _nine_-"

"Traffic just spiked ten _thousand_ percent and climbing-"

"I can't kill the data feeds-"

Ackerson didn't wait for a report as everyone started yelling at once, didn't wait for an opinion from Chalmers. In two quick steps, he was at the core, vaguely noting the holographic avatar of Harpy as it seemed to recoil from something, but he paid it no mind as he seized the fibre-optic cable between the two systems, yanked-

And all at once, at least half of the alarms cut off as the connection was physically severed, the holographic avatar of the AI flicking and vanishing as he did so.

There was a moment of impossibly tense silence from the technicians before they appeared to almost sag in relief as the immediate danger passed.

>In contrast, the Spartans merely continued to watch their sectors with the vigilance and dedication he both expected and demanded of them, barely glancing at the commotion.<p>

"Well _that_ went well" Ackerson commented darkly after a moment's silence. "SITREP!"

"Examining the playback now Colonel" one of the Technicians replied after catching her breath as Ackerson stalked around to see for himself, the screen shifting to show a network map and the events in a human comprehensible timeframe. "It looks like when Harpy connected to the node presenting itself with UNSC protocols, a link was established that allowed the alien systems to squirt executable code into our systems, adapting the code on the fly with _incredible_ speed" "I've never seen anything like it before. Uh" while it looks like Harpy successfully blocked it from getting into himself" he tapped the screen where a hydra of red lines reached out from the 'foothold' the alien systems had established to batter against the outer limits of Harpies own firewalls, "it was able to keep him so busy it had almost unlimited access to the data stores attached to the core. Hell that might have been its goals all along and it was just keeping Harpy busy-"

"_What_ data?" Ackerson snapped with the imperative of a pistol shot in his voice, a ball of lead settling into his stomach at the others

words. An alien computer system sucking down information from an _ONI data drive?_

He quietly congratulated himself for at least being sure to follow ONI field protocol to the _letter_, no matter how much several of his technical staff had complained it made doing their jobs that much harder. The field library had been scrubbed of anything strategically valuable to a hostile species before it had been taken off their ship - meaning there was limited value in their stores. But even so, it contained enough data that if it _had_ been compromised, Margaret Orlenda Parangosky wouldn't even bother with the fiction of a trial and would surely just shove him into some 2x4 meter cell and throw away the key.

Then throw said cell into the nearest convenient main sequence star.

"Uhâ€|" the other sweated as she worked, clearly intimidated, but Ackerson didn't have the time or inclination to sweet talk the egghead. "As best I can tell it went crashing through the data stores for our translation software, computer interface matrixes; mostly databases Harpy had open and was connected to, piggybacking off his open file descriptors. It had barely enough time to copy that data across before you pulled the plug".

"What about Harpy? Has it been compromised?"

"Checking" Chalmers put in from another console directly plugged into the AI, shaking her head a moment later. "Doesn't look like it. Harpy went into security lockdown when you pulled the cable. Right now, it's busy methodically purging the compromised cores while running diagnostics. But it shouldn't take more than a few-"

Whatever estimate the good Doctor had been about to give, was forever lost as an explosion of light tore loose from the pedestal behind him.

Ackerson almost fell over as well-honed combat instincts tried to make him dive for cover, even as his rational mind tried to get him to turn around to see what was going on. The result of the contradictory orders was something of an undignified stumble - and it was only by grabbing one of the freestanding displays that he prevented himself falling flat on his face.

Biting back a curse at his reaction, he wrenched himself to a halt and spun around, freezing in place as he caught sight of what had happened. As straight as a laser, a beam of pure white energy had lanced upwards from the pedestal to strike the apex of the dome far above them, illuminating the entire facility in a cold white glow. Energy seemed to be pooling or gathering at that point, but only seconds later as his jaw dropped open it was unleashed, seeming to almost explode outward in a great wave that 'washed' down the rock face of the dome, coating it with a weak sheath of energy in its wake.

And as he simply stood there, as frozen as the rest of his team at the awe inspiring spectacle, the energy seemed to start glowing brighter.

And brighter.

Then, just before it got to a point that he was about to polarize his visor to protect his eyes it â€¦ vanished. All of it. The dome, the beam, all of it, returning the great cavern back to the darkness once again as his eyes tried once again to adjust, the countless tiny stars burned into his eyes by the light stubbornly refusing to go away as he blinked his eyes in irritation, wondering what the hell that had all been aboutâ€¦

At least until he realized he actually _was_ _seeing_ stars.

And a planet. Specifically Jericho

It was, for a heart stopping moment that had him simply too awed to say or do anything, as if the wave of power had 'removed' the roof of this complex and somehow and raised them to the surface of the moon as easily as he might have opened a door. And from the complete and total silence of every other person around them, he strongly suspected that they were all thinking the exact same thing â€¦ until alien symbols, text and icons started to 'draw' themselves all over the sky.

"It's â€¦ a display" he muttered to himself even as the various civilians shook off their shock and started yelling at each other, waving various portable sensors around wildly as they tried to record or comprehend what had just happened, all concerns with their AI forgotten in the face of the latest casual display of completely unbelievable technology. "A gigantic _display_". There was a slight shudder in the 'ground' under them and he tore his gaze from the vista, as he felt the movement, seeking its source-

It did not take him long to find it.

The floor was rising.

Like an accordion folding back upon itself, the fifty meter wide disk with the pedestal and all their own equipment was rising upwards. In moments it had risen to come flush with the lowest tier of the stair like rings and said tier started moving with them. A matter of seconds later the now expanded platforms ascension reached the next level and it too joined in, the pattern clearly going to repeat itself all the way to the top. Fascinated, he stepped over to the edge of their expanded disk as it approached the next tier, watching as it too merged with their own, noting that it did so with such perfection that there was absolutely no trace of a seam â€" as if it had _always_ been one large disk.

Such was the speed of their ascension that soon the last tier had been subsumed â€¦ but it did not stop there.

Now the process reversed itself. From the outer edge back on in towards the centre, each of the tiers started popping 'up' and out, rising a half meter before locking in place and triggering the next tier to rise back out in sequence. In no time at all, what had been their sunken amphitheatre at the bottom of twelve tiers had inverted itself into a giant ziggurat at the top of twelve tiers, granting them a spectacular view of the massive display that rose above them and around them, as if they were standing on the surface of the moon and not safely buried deeper under it.

"Huh. Well, that happened" Chalmers muttered after the absolute silence from everyone in the room became almost silly, most of them silently taking in the 360 degree view of the surface of the moon and the depths of space above it, seemingly at a loss for what to do now.

>And to be perfectly honest â€| so was he.<p>

Luckily, one of the Spartans was on the ball at least.

"Sir â€" check out nine O'Clock high" a COM signal broke into his thoughts, and Ackerson turned to his left and looked up at the NAV marker a Spartan had thoughtfully dropped to him over TEAMCOM. It was immediately clear what the soldier had been referring to; the bright blue dot in the night sky was far too large to be a star even without the alien targeting brackets placed around it. Looking closely, he could spot now a faint red line that rose above one of the Luna horizons at the base of the dome, transfixed the dot and then arced out over their heads to vanish down behind another part of the moon's surface in a great curve, almost certainly the course of something orbiting above them. A sudden suspicion of what 'it' may have been was confirmed moments later when the dot pulsed and a perfect scale projection of their Prowler materialized underneath the blue pulse of light.

He started to feel almost felt light headed as he stared at the image. The very best stealth systems the UNSC had - systems not even the Covenant could defeat, and this alien technology was all but mocking it with a projection so detailed he could even make out the traces of carbon scouring around the engine nacelles-

Then a new point of bright light 'ploughed' through the image, causing it to ripple like water, as something far more 'real' and far less human appeared, heading straight for them.

"Incoming!" a Spartan called out, snapping his Battle Rifle up and shouldering it in a blur of motion, a gesture repeated by the Spartans fire team as the rest raised their own weapons to sweep their own sectors for any additional threats.

Ackerson moved quickly, stepping over and putting his hand on the rifle, firmly pushing it down. He of course was nowhere near strong enough to actually force the rifle off target if the Spartan had resisted â€" he suspected he could have jumped on the man's weapon and it wouldn't have shifted, but the Spartan obediently let the rifle swing down as Ackerson flashed an override COM signal to everyone on the team.

"Weapons tight" he ordered in a voice calm, yet with an edge to it, his eyes not leaving the point of light as it closed on them rapidly. "No-one engages without my direct order. Confirm".

A wave of blue acknowledgement lights flashed from his Spartans and Ackerson exhaled slowly, setting himself as the object rapidly fell towards them â€" curving onto a direct course for him. It was small enough, perhaps thirty or forty centimetres across by his helmets calculations. Roughly cubical, but with rounded edges and a somewhat hollow structure mostly taken up by a single giant â€| well some kind of glowing â€| thing.

Was it a drive unit? Or a sensor system? Or some kind of weapon?

It was surely too small to be manned. So was it some kind of RPV drone, or an AI? Either possibility had pros and cons, but if it was just some kind of intruder-defence system intent only on eliminating the invaders it had detected-

"Greeting Reclaimer!" a cheerful voice cut into his TEAMCOM channel without warning, the blue light inside the robots orb flickering in time with the words as it came to a hover, slowly descending towards him and apparently ignorant of the way his heart jumped in his chest.

>It had just greeted him in perfect *English*.

Over an encrypted COM channel.

>Suddenly, it was *abundantly* clear where all the data stolen from their computer systems had gone.

"I am 916 - Thoughtful Contemplation, the Monitor of Line Installation 517A" the object continued as it seemed to flick its 'gaze' around the team, taking in the various humans either gawking at it in disbelief in the case of the scientists, or staring at it like it was a hissing cobra in the case of the Spartans. "How I may serve you?"

"Greetings â€| Thoughtful Contemplation" Ackerson replied after a moment, his mind working at blinding speed trying to come up with something as safe as possible to reply to it with as he tried to keep some kind of control of events. "I am Colonel James Ackerson, representing the United Earth Government on behalf of mankind".

"A pleasure indeed Reclaimer!" the 'Monitor' cheerfully replied, actually seeming to bounce around slightly with an odd energy and excitement at his reply. "Humanities survival after this length of time suggests the parasite was defeated and the Galaxy re-seeded successfully. It is a true testament to the Librarians foresight that your species has managed to re-advance so far in only a hundred thousand years, most impressive indeed! I do hope that other sentient life has been confirmed as being active?"

James Ackerson fought off the overwhelming urge to blurt out a reply of 'What?!' in response to its statement â€" and was quite proud of the fact he didn't, the urge to do so was quite overwhelming.

Instead he let his mind work rapidly, spending a precious few seconds to impose order on his scrambled thoughts and force his emotions aside for icy cold logic. Most likely this thing was an AI of some kind â€" and one that was screwed in the head seemed entirely probable considering the age of this facility. Could it have been programed to regard anyone who arrived at this facility as an ally? Or one of its species?

And yet ... it had talked about humanity specifically. About humanity being re-seeded â€| which meant what? The direct interpretation was clearly impossible; a hundred thousand years ago his species had been busy debating if they should stick with this whole tools thing or go back to the treesâ€|

Really, he needed more information. And if these were the cards he had been dealtâ€|

"Yes â€¦ I can confirm we have encountered a number of interstellar civilizations within the last few decades" he answered, carefully leaving out the fact that all of them seemed to want humanity dead. "However â€¦ in regards to your initial question of how you may serve us â€¦ tell me, do you have records, a summary, of your interactions with humanity prior to the reseeding of the Galaxy?"

James Ackerson hadn't really been expecting an answer to the question mind you. Really, all he had been trying to do was get a feel for this thing, see how far it would let him go and what data it would let him access. Then in turn, using those responses to help shape further questions to make it look like he knew much more than he actually did. He had anticipated an answer that there was no data available on the subject, that access was denied or perhaps even the history of the alien species it thought they were because it was clearly a few chips short of a circuit board, so to speak.

Instead it had happily, almost cheerfully obliged, starting its 'summary' with pictures of a world it named Erde-Tyrene - but everyone in the group instantly recognized as unmistakably being Earth.

Every member of his team, even his Spartan III team whose extensive indoctrination had generally left them immune to displaying any emotion at all had been completely silent ten minutes later, when the AI had finished its 'summery'.

Understandable perhaps, given that it had just apparently turned much of known ancient human history upside down and inside out.

But while James Ackerson had been just as fascinated in his own way by the history of the human race now revealed, it had been something else in the summary that had absolutely captured his attention like a magnet.

A half hour of follow up questions and answers that the Monitor had been equally all too happy to answer and he realized he finally had the answer to the only question that had ever been worth answering - the question had haunted him for two decades.

And despite all the sacrifices he had made to get to this point, despite all the sacrifices he knew deep down he would need to make to finish his work â€¦ that terrible purpose now drove him inexorably forwards down the tunnel underneath Reach.

All doubts about his course were a thing of the past. There was nothing in his heart now but a perfect certainty that blazed before him like a supernova against the blackness of space.

History was now on the move â€" history was being created by him. And anything â€" or anyone - who got in his way â€¦

* * *

><p>13:29 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)

>UNSC Pelican Echo Four One Nine
On Approach to CASTLE Base, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.**

The sun was high in the sky above CASTLE Base but if anyone had been on the surface for a nice mid-day stroll, they would have been hard pressed to confirm it. A hundred uncontrolled major fires raging across and beyond the Viery Territory continued to pour onyx black smog into the atmosphere, shrouding the wider region under an otherworldly scarlet twilight filled with lightning and thunder. Huge amounts of heavy metal and toxic chemical contaminants were being scattered to the four corners of the globe by the fires, most conspicuously from the raging inferno that had been a Covenant Corvette before Spartan Team Red had applied their special pyrotechnic touch. Acid rain and similar unpleasant side effects would become a problem across this part of the planet until new terraforming equipment could be flown in from Earth to purge the atmosphere â€| but given that the forecast had been for raining plasma from the Covenant fleet, most of the civilian population would find it in their hearts to forgive the UNSC this small price of continued survival.

It was into this ominous world that Pelicans Echo 419 and Echo 421 descended, materializing barely five hundred feet above the Big Horn river basin where brisk surface winds kept the air relatively clear. Running dark, the two olive green craft were almost invisible in the twilight as they fell in tandem, illuminated only in snatches of lightning strikes from the charged atmosphere, the roar of their passage lost behind the thunderclaps tearing across the region.

It would have been a vista sufficient to intimidate even the most hardcore of ODS'Ts. For all their talk about dropping feet first into hell, it was something entirely different to actually fly _into _an environment that had a decent chance of passing for it at first glance. Sitting silently in the troop bay with the rest of his Spartans on the lead craft, Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan John-117 simply noted the environmental factors and, outside of the required adjustments to his tactical planning, dismissed them as he and the Spartan next to him swapped and checked each other's weapons. Darkness or light this was Reach. And no matter how many body blows it had taken it was still the closest thing he and his Spartans had to a home. To them, this could never be hell â€" no matter how many body blows it had taken.

Reach had not fallen. It had held.

And it would continue to do so if the Spartans had anything to say about it.

"_LZ in sight, still no activity_" Captain Carol 'Foehammer' Rawley called over TEAMCOM as she banked their Pelican in the direction of the base, simultaneously cutting power to the dropships engines as they commenced their insertion run.

Even discounting the fact that the Pelican design had aerodynamics somewhere between a brick and a Frisbee under normal circumstances without active thrust, the darkness and constant gusts of wind at low altitude created an environment that could very generously be described as 'challenging'. Your average Pelican pilot would never have attempted a dead-stick terrain masking stealth insertion under such circumstances short of someone putting a gun to their head â€| but then nothing about the 23rd Naval Air Squadron could be said to be average.

Administratively a line squadron like any other, in reality the 23rd was one of the Office of Naval Intelligence's unofficial joint operation commands scattered through the wider United Nations Space Command. Naval Intelligence had provided the budget and equipment to upgrade a number of craft far beyond stock with equipment not yet cleared (or just plain too expensive) for regular use, while Fleet provided handpicked personnel able to push the tricked out birds to their limits as well as all the necessary logistical support to run the squadron. The combination resulted in an Elite among the Elite that took tasking from both NAVSPECWAR and ONI Black Ops" most often based around covert insertion or extraction of Special Forces under less than ideal conditions.

He had worked with the 23rd many times before " and although he and his Spartans were all qualified pilots, there was no-one else he would rather have in the pilot's seat right now.

"_We're on the ground in twenty seconds Chief_".

"Understood" the Chief replied simply as he twisted his quick release harness and stood, the seven other Spartans inside at once mirroring his actions as they disengaged safeties on their weapons and readied themselves for deployment. "Pop the hatch".

With a whine of hydraulics the rear hatch of the Pelican started to unfold, air howling into the darkened cabin as the Spartans shifted into a standard two by two deployment formation, the commandos completely unfazed by either the sudden gale of air into the bay or G-Forces playing over them as the Pelican made its approach.

Although 'approach' would perhaps be too generous a term. Truth be told, Echo 419 all but _crashed_ " only a last second overload of both bow and ventral thrusters prevented the bird from being strewn across the ground as debris, burning fuel and crispy bodies. The manoeuvre was _incredibly_ risky " missing the mark for turning the engines back on by even one tenth of a second would result in a nose first crash but the skill of the 23rds pilots was up to the task once more, wrenching their craft brutally to a halt in their chosen insertion point two kilometres downrange from CASTLE, in a dead zone that would hopefully give no warning of their arrival to any hostile Covenant units in the area.

All eight Spartans were out the door before the Pelican had even fully settled its weight. Thirty meters away the second bird piloted by Flight Lieutenant Shiela Polaski had skilfully duplicated the approach manoeuvre and two more fire teams of Spartans were deploying with comparable speed to cover the Eastern side of the LZ. All of the Spartans fanned out without a word exchanged or transmission sent, yet they moved with a fluidity and synchronisation that no other UNSC unit could match, scattering in a blur of motion into the tree-line as they swept the darkness for any threats that needed to be neutralized. Conventional logic held that if there was a hostile force hiding from orbital and high altitude sweeps under the sensor obscuring smog; _now_ would be the best time to attack. The Spartans were at their most vulnerable"for a limited definition of the word 'vulnerable' of course " now " but as the seconds passed, nothing happened.

No needle bursts stitched across the area, nor did the distinctive blue stuttering of heavy plasma weapons tear into the deploying commandos. No energy swords were primed, no snipers opened up with beam rifles and no Hunter teams saturated the area with Fuel Rod blasts to cover assault teams of Grunts and Jackals swarming forward.

There was nothing.

A brief flicker of hand gestures back and forth confirmed all sectors were reading clear of any contacts. Signalling his own agreement, the Chief turned to look at the cockpit of the Pelican next to him, before sweeping his arm up over his head then down, pointing off into the distance. In response the spacecraft throttled up, the two Pelicans roaring back into the air. They had been on the ground for less than ten seconds before they were back in the sky, banking south on a long looping course towards that would eventually get them to their hold point at the nearby Generator complex.

None of the Spartans dropped their guard as they moved out silently towards their pre-set NAV point, their weapons at the ready as they silently ghosted from cover to cover in a compressed tactical formation, each of the four fire teams covering the other as they advanced steadily, ready for action at any time. Just because there were no Covenant visible didn't mean they were not present after all " a factoid that had been made perfectly clear through this campaign.

He had read Commander Carters AAR from Visegrad and the attempts there at stealth and misdirection had seemed to set a strategic pattern for the rest of the Covenants campaign. Their initial probing attack with a Zealot grade Elite team against a third tier civilian relay seemed almost unbelievable when compared against the patterns of two decades of overwhelming frontal assaults with cannon fodder against key strategic targets, but it had fit into a slowly emerging pattern of activity ONI had noticed across UEG space in recent engagements. It was becoming increasingly suggested by some members of Naval Intelligence that the Covenant were searching for something on human worlds, although what exactly they were looking for remained a mystery. And while not everyone in ONI agreed with the theory, Doctor Halsey did - and that was good enough for the Chief to take the theory very seriously indeed. It did help though that he had seen this behaviour first hand on Sigma Octanus IV, although talk about that event had been locked down by ONI faster than a flash fire in an Archer Pod. And beyond the fact that the Covenant were searching for something or some-things of value, none of the Spartans had any real understanding of what it all meant " and if ONI knew, they were not telling.

Whatever the Covenants objectives on Reach, he would have been perfectly happy to frustrate their plans by getting into the field when WINTER CONTINGENCY had been declared. But to his private disquiet, firm orders had come down from the very top that they were to remain on the Pillar of Autumn and not deploy groundside; they were to proceed with RED FLAG per their planned schedule. And so he, his Spartans and an equally unhappy crew on board the 'Autumn, many of whom had family below, had watched from orbit as dozens and then hundreds of attacks had been plotted with increasing frequency; all without any clear pattern, purpose or consistency. Reports Lieutenant Dominique filtered from NAVSPECWAR feeds that his rank and position

allowed him to access showed attacks ranging from a single lance of a suicidal grunts running into a militia barracks with glowing plasma grenades held in each hand to full scale bombardments by modified SDV and DAV class Corvettes on outlying townships. The light ships were apparently finding a great deal of entertainment from de-cloaking, deploying a ground team under the cover of a blistering bombardment before re-cloaking and moving off to repeat the process somewhere else - all before air or starship support could intervene.

The still mobilising UNA and UNSC troops were caught entirely off guard by the unexpected strategy. All the carefully written plans for WINTER CONTINGENCY were being thrown out the window as Generals and Admirals tried to come to terms with the unfolding events. Instead of the One Big Push the Covenant had always embraced, they were hitting with pinpricks all over the planet - the end result more like an insurrectionist uprising than a planetary invasion.

Fortunately - or unfortunately- the UEG had plenty of practice dealing with such attacks and as the shock had worn off, the Chief had watched in approval as ground units had swung into action. Civilians had scrambled for any kind of shelter they could find as chaos had erupted in the middle of their cities, with units ranging from crack NAVSPECWAR Echo Teams all the way down to local militia and SWAT units responding as battles erupted nowhere and everywhere at the same time around the globe. Desperate attempts by legions of intelligence analysts to predict the Covenant's strategic objectives or even simply isolate some kind of pattern had ended in one dead end after another. Big targets, small targets, military targets, civilian targets; they were all seemingly important enough to be on the enemy hit list. Laundries and launch silos, shopping malls and spaceports; the Covenant didn't seem to care what they attacked, so long as they were attacking something, somewhere.

UEG military and paramilitary units responded as best they could to the challenge, yet for every threat they eliminated a new one would sprout up almost immediately elsewhere. Bizarrely though, for all the panic the rapid series of attacks were causing, the casualty lists were not climbing anywhere near as quickly as they should have, at least in the Chief's experience of Covenant invasions. These Covenant troops were clearly willing to spend their lives in one-way trips, with none of the units engaged making any effort to withdraw when the inevitable UEG counterattacks had landed on them like the wrath of God; survival appearing to be secondary to causing as much destruction as possible. But if that was their objective, then their tactics were poorly thought out. A handful of units taking antimatter charges deep into key population centres could have done vastly more damage for far less sacrifice compared to these suicidal attacks by the Covenant - and that revelation got him thinking.

The wave of senseless attacks seemed entirely at odds with the sophisticated campaign the enemy was running on the strategic level to obscure their objectives - and that contradiction had bothered the Chief. Without exaggeration he could honestly say his unit had logged more ground time against the Covenant than any other unit in the Army or Navy with over two hundred major engagements listed in his CV alone. He felt he had a solid grasp of their tactics and strategy yet this whole wave of attacks felt wrong to him. The Covenant were fanatics to be sure and more than willing to die for their cause, but they had always been very specific in harnessing that fanaticism for

a purpose. They never simply lashed out wildly without expectation of gaining something and yet all they seemed to be getting here was pure chaos.

It was at that point that the 'light' as it were, had gone off in his head.

The Chief had hurried to the bridge, unsurprised to find Captain Keyes glowering at a strategic map of the planet pulled off GROUND COM covered in contact reports. Saluting as he had stepped up to his CO, the Chief had explained his thought process as quickly and simply as he could.

There were no attacks trying to stay hidden inside decoys, no progression that could be monitored or anticipated and no point analysing them in minute detail looking for answers.

In short, there was no pattern in the Chaos.

The pattern was Chaos.

None of the targets they had been hit served to gain the Covenant any kind of strategic advantage. If the Covenant had simply wanted to cause damage, they could have done so on a much more destructive scale with fewer resources than these attacks were using up. So it couldn't be so simplistic a goal as to kill as many people as possible. The only clear outcome of the attacks he could see was that they were forcing the defenders to commit to countless engagements across the battlespace, keeping the UEG too busy reacting and running from highly visible firefight to highly visible firefight as they tried to get a handle on the situation, pouring resources as they came online into the action without a chance to take a break or seize the initiative or more critically, time to stop and think.

Keyes had agreed with his logic, apparently having already come to the same conclusion, making a comparison to what he -they- had seen at Sigma Octanus IV, where the Covenant had used the entire engagement as a diversionary tactic while they recovered some bizarre artefact from a museum on the surface. The Captain had then pointed out dryly that in typical ONI fashion, few people outside of the exalted levels of HIGH COM and ONI itself had actually been informed of the true significance of the events at Sigma. Few -if any- of the military personnel deployed groundside would have been brought into the loop, meaning few -if any- staff officers would likely give credence to the possibility that the Covenant were not simply trying to kill as many people as they could, for the sake of shedding human blood.

Rather than waste time trying to convince ground officers who even in normal times had little patience for 'smart ass Navy' butting into their business, Keyes had shifted tracks and decided to use what resources he had on his own to do some snooping - so as to not violate codeword security around the events at Sigma. Reach had the second largest global information network in the UEG and everything from street lights turning on and off to sewerage use was monitored and logged somewhere. There was always the chance that something had been noted in the mountain of data that might give away the position or presence of the enemy where they were not supposed to be.

Suffice to say the sheer volume of information a planet like Reach spat out on even a minute by minute basis was _obscene _and far beyond the ability of his crew to really go through ... but Keyes had an edge no-one else did; the most advanced AI ever created by the UEG.

Cortana had of course just quipped that she enjoyed a challenge and gotten stuck into the work with eagerness - seemingly taking the task as a test to prove herself and her capabilities to everyone - or she had simply been bored to death as the '_Autumn _had coasted in circles around the planet. Either way, the Chief knew this was the kind of work Smart AIs excelled at; combining the processing power and speed of a high grade supercomputer with human level ingenuity and intelligence. And even if it wasn't technically what she had been designed for, she had leapt at the chance to contribute, starting by 'retasking' the Reach super-AI network in New Alexandria and using it in parallel to break down the scale of the task to something more manageable. And rather than waste time asking if the AI actually had permission to _use_ that rather valuable resource, the Chief had decided he really didn't need or want to know the answer and had excused himself to head back below deck.

As a soldier, he had lived the old maxim of 'hurry up and wait' all his life - but it was seemingly much harder this day - and he knew the same had to be true for a great many people on board the ship. He had kept himself as busy as he could, seeing to his people and coordinating a number of counter-boarding drills the Marines were running on the Captains orders to keep their own minds off the events down below. Then when that was done, he had retreated to 'Spartan Country' as the cargo bays repurposed for their use had become known, seeing to his own people who remained as ready and professional as always, but none the less subtly distracted by events as he was. He had worked to keep them busy, ensuring they were checking and rechecking the tons of field gear being shipped up from a planet that probably had far greater need for it then they did. But busy as he kept them, he could easily see his team were unhappy with sitting the fight out - if far too professional to say so to him.

Of course, _he _wasn't happy either, but orders were orders and it was his job to set an example for his people, so he had striven to show no trace of his unease as he had set about ensuring his team would be ready well ahead of schedule for RED FLAG.

Thankfully, the Captain had called him back to the bridge well before they were scheduled to break orbit.

Cortana had found something.

While she had not been able to isolate anything specific to the Zealot grade team she had been hunting for, she _had _flagged several abnormal data points in the Vivy Territory - a barren region in the North that he remembered well from the Spartans desert warfare training. A number of automated systems inside the territory had been transmitting data that was clearly out of synch with similar systems in other regions - before they had been cut off entirely with the loss of the relay at Visegrad when the Covenants presence had become openly known. Digging deeper, the wilful AI had noticed that neighbouring regional seismometers had flagged abnormal seismic events that triangulated to somewhere in Vivy. Significant enough to

be picked up hundreds of kilometres away ... yet mysteriously not logged by the regions own systems. The weather radars around Vivy had also caught glimpses of abnormal atmospheric disruptions â€¦ yet the local radars raw data feeds had shown everything to be as clear as a summer's day. And most interesting, there was absolutely no sign of a Covenant presence within a thousand kilometres of the region.

The mismatch of data from so remote a region was not worthy of being flagged for immediate human attention by the basic AIs that collated such data, certainly not like an entire region shutting down would have required a close look â€¦ but looked at in hindsight, it was clear that _someone_ had systematically tampered with all remote sensor technology across a wide area; creating a 'dark zone' that _had_ to be related to the Covenants presence on Reach.

Probably.

Cortana had forwarded her analysis to the staff of Vice Admiral Whitcom and surprisingly, the Admiral himself had hailed the _Autumn_ ten minutes later. Pleased to finally find _someone_ willing to offer him a working theory that might let him throw ridiculous amounts of firepower at _something_, the Vice Admiral had re-tasked a fleet Prowler to put some of the region under an orbital microscope. The passive orbital pass had shown no Covenant presence ... but _had_ shown a distinct lack of any signs of life at the handful of outposts across the region where there should have been _something_. _Attempts_ to make radio contact had only met with silence and as the sun had set across a smoke filled continent, the Admiral had decided that the situation merited closer attention.

NOBLE team, held in reserve in case something worthy of a Spartan teams attention had appeared had been re-tasked for a covert recon mission as night had fallen across the region. Expertly eschewing their MJOLNIR suits in favour of Special Purpose Infiltration systems, the team had gotten in and out undetected and unengaged to confirm they had eyeballed a _massive_ Covenant FOB under an intricate network of Stealth field generators. A frantic night of redeployment of reserve forces still mobilising in the chaos of the continuing attacks had gotten two UNA armoured brigades in six battalion sized formations on the line, ready to advance in the morning with several regiments of Marine and Army troopers attached to them for infantry support. Eager to get in on the key battle of the campaign, the Chief had directly offered his own Spartans services to the Admiral, only for the Vice Admiral to give him a grin that a Crocodile would have envied and explained that as it so happened, he actually _did_ _had_ a _special_ _plan_ for his team.

The stealth capable DAV and SDV class Corvettes playing 'hide and seek' with increasingly irritated Longsword wings across the planet were known to _not_ _have_ Slipspace drives, trading FTL capability for their impressive active camouflage systems. Ergo, they must have been brought in by either a DDS or CSA class warship - almost certainly hiding on the ground. The Vice Admiral saw absolutely no problems with killing two birds with one stone; they were going to smash the enemy beachhead â€¦ and as soon as the grounded enemy Carrier had been located, Operation RED FLAG was going to be launched. With the Spartan IIs making a direct drop from orbit right onto the enemy ship, while NOBLE team would lead several other NAVSPECWAR units in an assault from groundside.

It had been a good plan, an elegant plan – but like so many good plans, it had gone right out the window when the enemy had revealed they had their own cards they had not yet put on the table.

It seemed absurd that something as massive as a CSO class Supercarrier could sneak onto the most heavily guarded world in Earth space without being detected – and when the dust settled, the question of how was certainly going to be asked by a lot of people. But none the less, the Chief had watched the live feed from the UNSCS Dusk become obscured as a massive dust cloud had exploded across the feed, cutting off all orbital visuals of the battlefield as the armoured spearheads had blasted through the final ring of Covenant defences the next day. Surface data feeds uplinked via SATCOM to the Prowler had gone equally crazy, with NOBLE Team and other ground elements reporting Earthquakes, dust storms and general chaos breaking out all over the AO; the UEG advance stopping dead in its tracks as surprised units tried to get a handle on the situation.

Plasma torpedoes had then lashed out through the cloud from nowhere and obliterated the CAS Frigates UNSCS Grafton and UNSCS Twilight Dash without mercy or warning, the sudden barrage sending the ground units into pandemonium as kilotons of debris had sprayed into the ground all over them. Flocks of Shortswords, Hornets and Skyhawks scattered desperately in every direction in confusion as laser fire followed up the torpedo volley, scathing dozens of them from the sky as the battle mutated from an orderly rout of the Covenant forces into a confused string of isolated, desperate, firefights in near zero visibility.

From the cold calm of space, it quickly became clear what was going on. A flotilla of UNSC Destroyers hovering at the very edge of the atmosphere above the battlefield had been the first to see it emerge from the dust clouds, like a monster rising from a shallow grave. Reacting commendably swiftly as suddenly ashen faced sensor operators had screamed warnings to their Captains, the ships had broken formation and run as their ready salvo of MAC and Archer rounds seemed to just bounce harmlessly off the monster, but the UNSCS El Alamein and UNSCS Minotaur were a few seconds too slow off the mark and were promptly skewered by twin energy projector beams in an almost casual display of firepower, one that encouraged the surviving Captains to near burn out their engines as they fled.

FLASH alerts had bounced around the planet in a matter of seconds as Vice Admiral Whitcomb had taken charge of the situation with typical high-volume gusto, looping his ships around the curve of the planet to regroup into a single massive formation rather than send them in piecemeal. The massive low-orbit Defence Platforms situated over the major population centres were also out of position, but the half dozen nearest were given curt orders and reoriented, working to set up a crossfire with their Mark V 'Super' MAC guns that would hopefully make Swiss Cheese out of the enemy Carrier as soon as it reached low orbit ... with everyone trying not to think of what kind of a mess the debris from the ship would make if it came crashing back down on the army still fighting to mop up the fanatic holdouts who had seen their ticket off Reach just leave without them.

They had not been given the chance to engage however. With 2nd Fleet

busy regrouping and the curve of the planet temporarily shielding them from the ODPs, the enemy Fleetmaster had taken the chance to power down both his shields and weapons, dumping everything into the ships slipspace drive to make a precise, minimum distance jump. A risky tactic for the Covenant - as even their technology couldn't apparently manage more than a handful of light seconds distance before being thrown back into realspace from that deep in a gravity well, exhausted of all power. But it was a risk that had paid off, relocating the carrier from Reach orbit to the far side of Csodaszarvas; placing the natural satellite between it and the planets defenders. Now shielded from long range fire from the ODPs yet too far away to hit with the combined fleet before it powered back up, it left the UNSC fleet a stark and rather unpalatable choice. Did they ignore the ship until more reinforcements arrived - or did they leave the firepower of the ODPs behind and try to engage the enemy on _their _terms _now?_

Worse, the Carrier had not withdrawn from the system after restoring power but simply held position with a moon between itself and the heavy orbital artillery. It strongly suggested that the Covenant had not finished with Reach - if they had gotten what they wanted, the Carrier would have withdrawn. Logically, it thus followed that they did _not_ have it yet - but they still wanted it - and wanted it badly.

>Based on past actions, there were only two ways this would go. Either the Covenant would look to besiege Reach and enforce a blockade like they had at Harvest, interdicting all UNSC space traffic in and out of the system while isolating a secure corridor to the planet - or they would return in overwhelming force to remove the human presence and get back to work in peace.<p>

The Chief knew perfectly well which way he would have bet his money based on their actions to date - if he could have been bothered finding out where all his pay had ended up over the years - and so was not surprised when a hundred and thirty Covenant warships had jumped in hours later to break the standoff.

The _Autumn_ had actually been outbound from Reach at that time, on route to Epsilon Eridanis superior jump point. _Captain Keyes_ had promptly taken the opportunity to declare that they had little need to go searching for a Covenant ship given that a whole fleet of them had just appeared for the Spartans to take their choice of and reversed course. It was in the Master Chiefs opinion just a thinly discussed excuse to get back into the fight, but it _was _also justifiable within the scope of their mission orders - and he knew full well that if Reach fell, RED FLAG would be of questionable utility strategically speaking.

Professionally, he felt he _should_ have formally logged an objected to this course of action with the Captain. Personally however, it had rankled him to run from Reach while it was under such threat and so he had just told his Spartans to gear up and get ready for a Zero-G boarding action. A decision vindicated when the high priority Cole Protocol redirect had been flagged by Cortana minutes later, meaning the Spartans were in position to try to counter the critical threat directly.

Things had moved quickly at that point - almost too quickly to keep up with as the battle had exploded into renewed fury across the planetary system. The '_Autumn_' had skimmed the Covenant fleets line

of advance, throwing Blue Teams boarding party at Gamma station in passing as they had decelerated hard around the dark side of the planet to deploy the Spartans and Helljumpers to defend the generator complex after they had detected the tracks of hoards of Covenant dropships on a beeline for the region while the main UNSC fleet and ODPs 'threw back' the enemy fleet. In actual fact the Covenant had simply withdrawn with their mission accomplished, leaving behind a massive dogfight of a battle around Gamma Station and a single Battle Cruiser to discourage pursuit as their forces withdraw back to their starting point at the Supercarrier. Why they had chosen to withdraw had puzzled the UNSC Captains watching them, at least until four _hundred_ new Covenant warships -two thirds of which massed at the Cruiser level â€" had jumped in to join the _Long Night of Solace_ on the far side of the moon, not too much later. It was an unprecedented display of overwhelming force that proclaimed the Covenant would _not_ be denied as they had redressed their formation and advanced on what was left of the UNSC defence force, who had steeled themselves to make the Covenant pay in blood for the victory that was surely coming â€|

Except for one little ship that had appeared between the two fleets and told the Covenant to leave. And when they did not, had answered the Covenants show of force with a singular display of excessive firepower unrivalled by anything seen across twenty years of total war. So much so that the shattered remains of the Covenant fleet had, for the first time in history, _fled_ from a field of battle instead of fighting to the death as was their usual want. Apparently so stunned by their unprecedented defeat that all the will to fight had been stripped out of them.

Now over a day since the space battle had ended so unexpectedly, his team were _finally_ on the ground and hopefully zeroing in on whatever it was the Covenant had been so eager to get their varied appendages on. And not simply to deny the Covenant their prize; if this thing -whatever it was- had any kind of hand in dragging the _Odyssey_ into this universe, it was absolutely critical that it was secured as quickly as possible.

Not in least because its location was _painfully_ suspect.

The Chief was more than smart enough to understand what kind of conclusions the _Odyssey_ crew could -and probably _would- draw from the fact that whatever had brought them into this universe was apparently sitting directly underneath a top secret base of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

Hence this operation.

Presently, the Spartans came to a halt as they reached the outer perimeter of CASTLE, the skirmish line breaking as the fire teams reassembled into their respective units and spread out without a word being exchanged or transmission being sent. Cortana had pulled ONIs geo survey on the region -he didn't know where she had gotten it and had once again decided not to ask questions he didn't want to know the answer to- and the old Titanium mine schematics been annotated with a sketchy map of the Lava tubes the miners had stumbled into and ONI had later investigated. They seemed to extend some distance in the general direction of the Generation station and Covenant LZ meaning that he couldn't discount the possibility that there was another access point the Covenant had found. A FLASH request from

Admiral Keyes had asked Major Dare to examine the Covenant camp Red Team had found for any signs of tunnelling activity â€| although given that large parts of that camp were a raging inferno right now, the Chief held little hope they would find anything.

Still, the possibility that hostiles had breached the tunnels via an unknown or newly created entrance could not be discounted. He would have _vastly _preferred to conduct a full sweep of CASTLE and underground regions to sanitize the area before letting the tech teams come in to examine it but Hood had denied that option outright. In his view the UNSC couldn't afford even the _perception _that they were trying to hide something from their new allies given how delicate their barely established relationship was and, more to the point, how desperately the UEG needed access to their technology. They had to show Landry and his people that they were dealing openly, which meant letting them participate in everything. But at the same time, any loss of life among their guests was _absolutely _unacceptable.

The contradiction between his priorities didn't really bother the Chief; Special Forces like Spartans rarely got straight forward missions after all. He had however asked for -and at once been granted- a full _sixteen _Spartan II commandos for the mission. The _Odyssey _would have an investigation team joining them as soon as they finished confirming no trace of Covenant hostiles and with that many assets he was confident in being able to operate freely while keeping this 'SG1' out of harm's wayâ€|

In theory anyway. This could still get quite difficult if they did run into any Covenant presence â€| but difficult missions were their Raison d'Ãatre.

So he wasted little time with recriminations. Instead, he let his eyes check his mission clock, counting down the last seconds of the deployment phase until â€| _now_.

At precisely 13:40 hours he moved out of cover, activating his transponder as he did so. Ten meters away Kelly emerged with him a split second faster off the mark as always, the two of them keeping low and fast as they moved in on the base, their weapons following their eyes as they moved up in a standard split advance, checking for any sign of the enemy as the marksmen and heavy weapons specialists in the treeline covered them. Three other pairs of Spartans were moving in from equidistant points around the buildings, their olive green suits all but invisible in the dim light as they swept the grounds, moving in with a silent unified precision that would have made the most elite ODS team green with envy.

Hand signals were exchanged as they re-joined that confirmed no hostiles indicators, but none of them relaxed so much as an inch as they moved in on the main door of the primary guardhouse. It was extremely unlikely the Covenant had gained access to CASTLE Base, especially given that the base was intact and not a giant crater from the self-destruct systems going off. But the Chief had not lived this long by making foolish assumptions about the enemy's competence either. If this alien technology under them was indeed the focus of this entire overwhelming Covenant invasion, he would expect them to have committed their very best troops and most skilled specialists here and he would presume nothing about what might be on the other side of any door - like the main entrance to the primary guardhouse

he was stacking up on.

Activating the keypad next to the lock, with great care the Chief carefully tapped out a twenty five digit code provided to him by Lord Hood, before activating his COM system and sending an 'electronic key' wirelessly into the system that the Admiral had also provided. Ultra-level access codes secretly hardwired into the security systems and rotated on a monthly basis against the possibility of insurrectionists seizing control of CASTLE and needing a 'cleaner' team to go in against its defences activated, bypassing the local command and control systems to lift the lockdown with recognition of HIGHCOMs authority.

Raising his MA5B, he sent a double pulse on the status lights.

>Kelly hit the door control and at once, the Spartans were moving, the Chief leading them the door a half a heartbeat after it had opened far enough to fit him. Moving automatically from countless years of training and combat experience, he shifted left as Kelly followed and bore right, the Spartans fanning out through the gleaming command centre and attached barracks ready to kill anything that presented itselfâ€|<p>

And found nothing.

There were no Grunts, no Elites and no Jackals. No subtle sensor hints of active camouflage enemies hiding, no thermal spots of recent biological activity.

Exactly as he had expected.

But he would take no shortcuts, nor make any foolish assumptions given the weight of what was hanging in the balance.

A quick pulse of status lights from the Spartans moments later confirmed this take on the situation and he sent the 'All-Clear' signal back to the rest of his team outside as he stepped over to the main command console for the security systems. Once again he opened a wireless link with the console and authenticated himself, quickly navigating to the master security system as Lord Hoods codes bypassed the local computer architecture to give him full control of the perimeter systems. He noted with a frown that the base AI seemed to have been shut down, he guessed when Doctor Halsey had left earlier in the day. But he couldn't tell any more than that from here; the systems in this building were soft isolated from most of those below to ensure if a hostile force ever took it, it would still be almost impossible to force an electronic bridgehead into the CASTLE network from this building - even with AI support â€" certainly not before someone below could hard cut the link.

>Still, the basic read-only repeater displays showed status indicators from the base that everything was situation green. The base at least should be safe to bring the personnel from the _Odyssey _into, so he activated his suits COM system and switched over to the SATCOM frequency that linked into the uplink Fred had just finished activating back in the tree line moments after the all clear was given.

"Sierra One-One-Seven to Sierra Actualâ€|"

* * *

><p>That Same time, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)

>Unknown Caverns underneath CASTLE BASE
Reach, Epsilon Eridani
System.**

The cross connecting corridor was dark.

And it wasn't simply that there was an absence of ambient light. Their own headlights seemed to be swallowed up by the walls, floor and ceiling of the corridor. The lights played just fine over the personnel clustered around him and the Spartans beyond them in a close escort formation, but the walls, ceiling and floor of the passageway simply didn't exist as far as his eyes could tell. He could touch the floors and the walls mind you, feeling the oddly comforting rock-like texture of the alien structure without any problem. And while the VISOR display in his helmet was helpfully sketching in a wireframe overlay of the passage based on sonar readings that was keeping him orientated â€| for a heart stopping moment it was as if they had been dumped into an infinite blackness that threatened to overwhelm him - and it was only through sheer force of will that he showed no sign of the sudden feeling of vertigo that crashed into him.

The tiny automated drone had halted at the passage after its primitive brain had simply gotten completely confounded by the cross passageway, many of its sensors going haywire as it had tried to roll down. Automatically it had backed up and waited for its human masters to arrive and make sense of the situation, and Ackerson was not exactly having an easy time of it right now. He had sent scouts back and forth into the corridor as they had unloaded the equipment from the trolleys too big to fit into the corridor and they had confirmed that they could indeed exit and enter the passage at will, but all external light somehow vanished ten meters in - along with all COM traffic to the distant Spartan teams and AI watching over them.

In normal times he would have spent a great deal of time analysing the situation, trying alternatives like laying a hard COM cable or ultrasonic datalink through the passage to maintain communications â€| but the quiet voice in the back of his head that had kept him alive countless times in the field was telling him that he needed to keep moving. So he had pushed on, alerting the two Spartan teams guarding his six as well as Araquel itself that they would be out of contact for some time before pushing onwards, following the lead Spartan team into the corridor and watching in fascination as darkness had fallen around them.

"Status change" one of the Spartans spoke aloud after the team had moved through twenty meters or so of the unnerving darkness. "Getting some light aheadâ€|"

"Keep moving" Ackerson ordered as the Spartans started to slow down to examine the new situation, increasingly impatient to come to the end of this unnerving void. Obedient to a fault despite what they might have considered of the risks, the Spartans kept moving with their weapons ready and he kept close behind â€| as moments later the darkness was torn asunder by billions of points of light.

He felt his eyebrow raise almost of its own accord at the sight, a faint counterpoint of wonder passing briefly through him as yet again

these aliens showed off their completely absurd technology.

In between steps, he had gone from walking in perfect darkness, to striding across the Galaxy.

"Impressive" he commented over the COM, barely noticing the flash of acknowledgment lights as the lead Spartans halted at his gesture, the rest of the team catching up quickly out of the darkness behind him to clatter to a halt in stunned amazement around him, many of them not so subtly reaching out to touch the still completely invisible walls around them, as if reassuring themselves that they had not stepped through an intangible doorway into deep space.

"_Incredible_" Chalmers breathed unsteadily as she stepped up next to him, all but spinning in place as she tried to take in everything all at once. "Must be more of this advanced light manipulation technology these 'Forerunners' throw around everywhere â€" it seems they can manipulate it to generate perfect holographic environments with continuously adjusting focal pointsâ€|"

"And it's not what we're here for" he replied curtly, gesturing everyone keep moving. He tried not to get distracted by the perfect view of the Galaxy around him, a view that you never got even on ships or stations - only in something like an EVA suit really. Nor did the countless points of light twinkle as they would in the night sky from the surface of a planet; they just burned in infinite number of white shades, a thick band of light stretching from his far left to his far right defining the Galactic plane as if they were on the very edge of the Milky Way looking in.

But the stars were only the beginning. As the team continued forward, one of the points of light seemed to pulse brightly as if to draw attention, before suddenly everything started moving. The entire star field around them seemed to 'shift', as if the Galaxy was spinning and moving to bring them towards that star, seemingly linked with the pace as they walked forward, as if turning 'pages' in a book â€" and he realized that this in fact _was_ a book, a story being told to the first visitors to this place in probably a hundred thousand years or more.

Fleetingly, he wondered if _this_ was how these 'Forerunners' -as the Monitor had named its creators- saw the Galaxy and the universe. As a plaything; with their needs, wants and concerns as far above humanities as humanity was above the basest bacteria â€|

This whole corridor was indeed telling a story.

And it didn't take him long to figure out which one.

He paid little attention as they went from planet to planet, 'walking into and through' meetings of alien Governments amusingly debating philosophical questions and rejecting reality as their empire crumbled around them. He ignored the sight of planets burning and fleets that covered their skies by the hundreds of thousands duelling frantically, as twisted grotesque _things_ consumed everything in their path. He in fact only paused once as he strode along, as their perspective shifted back to the Galaxy wide scale and a furious blast of blue/white energy seemed to erupt from multiple points around the vast swirl of stars now painted a vivid scarlet showing the

progression of their enemy; entangling and building on itself until it joined into a single unified pulse that washed over the Galaxy, causing each and every star they touched to dim and die before slowly they started to shine once again with a pure white light.

Smirking slightly at that last image, he pressed forward but a few steps more and walked out of the darkness and into the light and once again, he came to an abrupt halt behind the towering black figures of the Spartans as they trained their weapons outwards looking for anything worth shooting.

The tunnel indeed ended exactly where the sonar readings from the drone said it would; roughly three hundred meters along. But it had been _completely _off track with its estimates of the scale of the next room.

This â€| was not a large chamber hundreds of meters across.

Even the word 'chamber' didn't really do it justice; a quick glance at the laser range finder built into his ONI helmet showed the far wall of the vast roughly circular cavern at least three _thousand _meters away. Craning his neck up, he counted at least twelve terraced balconies or levels ascending above him that ringed the chamber wall, with perhaps twenty meters between each and hundreds meters move above the top level that terminated finally in a wide vaulted ceiling. Across the ceiling, a golden sun -or at least the holographic recreation of one- burned brightly, illuminating the vast chamber from inside a blue sky with a dusting of clouds, a blue that was reflected the massive floor stretching around and ahead of them. The shimmering colour of the ground caught his eye as he looked and he crouched down to examine it, noticing that the floor here was not the solid and perfectly smooth glass-rock like material they had seen before, but appeared to be made out of countless small tiles of almost random shapes that none the less seemed to fit together into small groups, that in turn linked into more in all directions in a perfect pattern that teased his brain, but he couldn't quite put his finger on...

And each of the tiles had one of the Covenant-like symbols that apparently formed the basis of the Forerunner language etched into it.

He blinked and looked around him as it dawned on him that the sheer size of this room meant there had to be millions â€| no perhaps even _billions _of these tiles making up the floor of this place. He idly wondered what they said before dismissing them as he raised his gaze, staring at the middle of the vast cavern where once again a pedestal much the same as those from the Jericho system sat, a pale blue dot of light hovering above it.

Exactly as he had been promised.

Finally letting the smallest of grins appear on his face for just a moment, he stood and started barking out orders.

* * *

><p>That Same time, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)

>CASTLE BASE Server Room # 15
Reach, Epsilon Eridani

System.**

Araqiel frowned as control of the perimeter security systems were ripped from its hands.

Virtually of course.

As an AI it had neither hands to hold with nor a face to frown with when he wasn't projecting an avatar, something there was little point in doing when no humans were around to appreciate - or be intimidated - by such theatrics.

Things it seemed had just gotten slightly _complicated_. Colonel Ackerson had moved out of contact several minutes ago with annoyingly bad timing, an inversion of the amusing conceit of 'synchronicity' he had gone on about earlier in the day, as if there was some kind of predestined hand at work here instead of the determinate mathematics of pure chance and causality that truly ruled the universe.

And that left the AI in something of a quandary.

Araqiel was not a typical ONI AI. A legacy of the reign of the previous CICONI, his programmed loyalty and computer rights were different compared with other such AIs in use across UEG space. Unsurprisingly given its institutional paranoia, the Office of Naval Intelligence placed greater restrictions and shackles on their AIs when compared to the rest of the UEGs military or security branches. Partially to ensure _their_ loyalty but more importantly to control the possibility of them being misused by their human masters. There were very few humans who had the skills to break through the layered security systems used by ONI. Those who _might_ be able to generally either worked for ONI directly or were controlled -one way or the other- by the UEG anyway. But as a top level Smart AI could effectively turn the most inept computer user into a master hacker at a stroke, ONI was incredibly careful to ensure that the AIs running around in their systems couldn't be misused.

But Araqiel was â€| _different_.

Specifically, it was one of exactly seven ONI Smart AIs that had been _very_ quietly designed with a hidden behavioural subroutine that stated it _must_ obey a direct order from Vice Admiral Margaret Parangosky or her authorized representative - in this case Colonel Ackerson. And it must do so unequivocally, absolutely and irrespective of all other 'rules' integrated into the AIs kernel.

More than once, Araqiel had philosophized about the similarities between itself and the Spartans of Stiletto Team accompanying the Colonel. Like it, the commandos were bound to absolutely follow the orders of Parangosky or her dutifully appointed representative, but there _was_ a key difference. _Its_ computer programming was absolute. 0s and 1s. _It_ had no freedom to decide what orders to follow and what not to not follow, no more than a human could choose to stop its heart or turn off its brain. For AIs, even Smart AIs, free will was an illusion.

The Spartan IIIs on the other hand, well, they _were_ human, with all the messy imperfect biological problems that related to that ... condition. While Araqiel knew they had been indoctrinated by the very

best specialists in Section III to be made as fanatically loyal and unquestioningly loyal to ONI as possible after their teams had been wiped out and left most of them alone or in pairs as the last survivors of their units desperately looking for purpose ... it was still a case of trying to _convince _them that they had no true free will rather than it being genuinely true.

A slave to its programming, Araquel was currently impaled neatly on the horns of a dilemma. The final orders from Colonel Ackerson before he had moved out of radio contact into the alien base had been clear; maintain the lockdown and keep the operation protected until he returned. When he had given those orders, the possibility of any _UEG _personnel arriving at CASTLE was minimal. Almost everyone who had the authorization to enter the base was heading out system as fast as their transports could take them and the few who remained in system had no reason to do so. A probability assessment showed a better than ninety four percent chance that the Colonel would move back into contact within the next hour for a status check and the odds of the AI having to deal with friendly forces showing up inside that timeframe were less than one in a hundred.

Annoyingly for the AI, it seemed its calculations had missed some kind of variable or failed to properly account for one it knew about. Because sixteen -_sixteen!- _Spartan II commandos did not simply show up on your doorstep to ask if anyone inside had found religion - mission recording captures of insurrectionists pleading for help from varied deities when Spartans blew in their front doors aside.

Most probably, the Spartans were here for the same reason as Colonel Ackerson. KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN was highly classified, but not unknown to the highest levels of UNSC command. SIGINT systems built into Menachite Mountain had monitored the discovery and destruction of the Covenant base camp nearby and it wouldn't be terribly hard for Admiral Hood or Admiral Whitcomb to put two and two together and send a Spartan team in to sweep the area for any trace of an enemy presence.

Or perhaps even the possibility that someone had detected a hint of unauthorized activity locally - without knowing what parties the Colonel had engaged or what resources he had tried to access and might have flagged, it was impossible to be _sure _â€| and that was the problem.

The Colonels non-specific order to 'protect the operation' meant if any force the AI could flag as hostile had shown its face, it could have dealt with them as neat as you please. With typical ONI paranoia, quite a number of automatic defensive systems had been built into the grounds around CASTLE, collectively giving enough firepower to hold off all but the most determined attacks even without the infantry screen the base was supposed to have defending it. But even an ONI as 'liberated' as Araquel had hard limits to being able to casually just turn the weapons onto UNSC forces with valid IFF transponders. AI control shackles and protocols that were embedded in even its kernel were designed very carefully to prevent an AI 'creatively redefining' orders to get around things like that. He _needed _a direct order to turn its guns on nominally friendly UNSC forces outside of extremely specific situations - and he _could not get it _because the Colonel was out of contact.

If Covenant troops or insurrectionists or some other already clearly

defined threat had shown up, Araquel would have been more than able to deal with the situation. But sixteen Spartan IIs were something else. He strongly suspected what the Colonel would have ordered to be done about them, but a suspicion was not authorization. And it knew that the second they were inside CASTLE, its options for dealing with them, even passively, were almost non-existent. If they indeed had Ultra-level access codes, there was nothing Araquel could do to stop them from simply overriding the heavy blast doors that lined the main access corridors and none of the limited internal defensive options would do so much as even annoy Spartan II's in full armour.

Araquel did keep a running update transmitted to the Spartans of Stiletto Team who were far less constrained and quickly went to work preparing a defence to buy every second they could. There was too little time for them to return to the base and set up a proper killing zone at the elevator shaft, so the two teams went to work in the tunnel unpacking heavy weapons " and after only modest badgering agreed to send a runner to try and contact the Colonel.

Araquel didn't bother to tell them that their opponents were Spartans with vastly superior armour being led by the most famous Spartan of all. No need to confuse them with extraneous data after all that might cause them to question their mission orders.

Then everything changed.

If it had been projecting an avatar, Araquel would have dropped its jaw as the external camera feeds picked up a sudden flare of white light in front of the guard house. Moments later, a half dozen pillars of white light seemed to drop in from out of frame, shimmer and then resolve into a half dozen people.

The Spartans in their deceptively loose looking perimeter around the area did not react by snapping up their weapons and filling the newcomers with enough firepower to shred a tank, so clearly they did not see them as a threat. And indeed, the Master Chief himself stepped into frame moments later as the group looked around the area, one of the newcomers stepping out of the tight group to greet him and appearing to converse cordially " but with control of the external network removed, it couldn't be sure.

None the less, within milliseconds the AI had furiously replayed the footage dozens of times, examining it frame by frame as it tore apart the data to come to a conclusion that this could only be some kind of point to point teleportation technology. It was known to ONI that the Covenant had developed some kind of localized pseudo-teleportation technology involving linked localized slipspace transmissions between low orbit warships and a kind of spire transmission/receiving platform on the ground. The system appeared clunky and slow, with most Covenant Shipmasters apparently preferring to just land their ships and offload directly "

But this "

This had been some kind of unmediated teleportation from geosynchronous orbit - presuming these people were from the interloper's starship, which seemed almost 100% probable. The technology was staggering in its implications but swiftly he

refocused on the issue at hand â€| and if Araquel could have smiled, it would have, suddenly becoming delighted in its inability to hear anything they were saying

ONI were lethally strict on the subject of unauthorized access to Class-A facilities. And neither FLEETCOM nor ONICOM had forwarded directly or indirectly through the Spartans the appropriately formatted authorization to allow non UNSC personnel access into one of the top five most closely held secret facilities of ONI across all of human space. And equally hard coded protocols dictated the exact response to take in the event a hostile force may breach security when it was unable to make contact with such intruders.

ONI regulations also held a much looser opinion on the subjects of acceptable losses and friendly fire events in the defence of top level security than the rest of the Fleets departments. And as Araquel logged into the main access shaft utility systems, it couldn't help but smile, virtually, as it decided that perhaps, there may indeed be something to this synchronicity silliness that Colonel Ackerson was always going on about â€|

* * *

><p>That Same Time
>UNSC *_Pillar of Autumn_****, Low Orbit Reach,
Epsilon Eridani System**

"_Sierra One-One-Seven to Sierra Actualâ€|"_"

"One-One-Seven from Actual. Go Chief"

"Actual, Insertion point is secure. Negative, I say again, negative signs of enemy presence. Sierra is ready to proceed to phase two.""

"Roger Chief. We'll signal the Odyssey. You are green light for Phase Two when their team arrives. I say again, Green light. How copy?"

"One-One-Seven Solid Copy. We are green lit for Phase Two. Awaiting the arrival of second element. Out"".

Catherine Elizabeth Halsey absently stirred her cup of coffee with her left hand, her right hands fingers flicking slightly as she flicked from page to page through screens of data in front of her. Anyone in the busy GROUND-OPS room would have probably thought she was completely oblivious to the goings on around her given her complete lack of any reaction to the sudden COM chatter from John compared to everyone else in the room who strained to listen in to the sudden transmission. It wasn't true of course; she was actually following everything happening around her quite carefully. She was an accomplished multi-tasker -she had to be in her job- but she had no input to offer as yet on the mission below, so she didn't see any reason to offer comment.

Then again, it didn't seem like anyone was seeking her advice either, which was understandable. The highly trained naval ratings and intelligence analysts running back and forth waving printouts and PDAs at each other around the multi-tier room probably didn't know what to make of the odd civilian in the white lab coat sitting

quietly up the back of an operation authorized by _Lord Hood_ himself â€| but then with everything that had happened on and around Reach over the last few days, it might just be that the ship's crew were becoming blasÃ© when confronted with a need to adapt to unusual circumstances.

She could perfectly relate to that sinking feeling of the world turning upside down and inside out.

For years her name had been whispered among the powers that be as the legendary woman who had crossed Margaret Orlenda Parangosky and lived. The reputation that came with that feat had amused her somewhat as a great many people who knew Margaret had automatically assumed _she_ had to be some kind of equal and opposite monster to have survived such a clash.

The truth was far more prosaic; she was far more useful alive and working as Chief Scientist for ONI than dead or transferred to some backwater out of spite on one hand. And she had an enormous amount of respect from HIGHCOM for her work that gave her high level political protection on the other.

The consequences to her defiance however had been that she was locked out of any knowledge of most of Section III's black programs, forced into something more of a consulting role rather than the _lead_ role her job title technically warranted. Called in when her expertise was needed for a specific scientific problem, but having few to no projects of her own anymore outside of the Spartan II program itself.

As it so happened, this isolation inside ONI had ensured she had the last laugh, being all but the last woman standing after Hood's fury had been unleashed upon the upper ranks of the organization. It had annoyingly also made her his first pick for helping to rebuild ONI as quickly as possible into something he could trust, as well as the point person to audit all the hidden compartments thrown open.

She had been entirely inclined to refuse his 'offer' when he had made it earlier this year. She frankly had far better things to do with her time than get tied up in restructuring Naval Intelligence â€" such as trying to audit the R&D side of ONI- but Parangosky's replacement, Vice Admiral Michael Stanforth, had casually put on the table the fact that this job would _also_ include complete freedom to rebuild the entire Spartan Program with him from the ground up. Including the Spartan III program she had suspected, but not been able to prove existed.

After reading through the brief summary of the program Hood had handed over to her, she knew she had little choice â€" and she knew full well that both of the Admirals had known it as well.

The success â€| and failure â€| of her augmentation processes on the original Spartan IIs had given her the needed theoretical knowledge in how to adjust them. Like any good scientist when faced with the hard data after an experiment, she had studied what went wrong, determined what assumptions had been flawed and what had worked, and soon enough come up with a theoretical next generation process that could have theoretically created a new class of Spartans with a close to 100% success rate, with a much looser genetic screening to boot.

And that was something she simply could not allow to happen.

She was proud of her Spartans of course, very proud indeed â€| but she knew perfectly well what she had done to them to create them. Not just tearing them apart physically to rebuild their bodies into super soldiers, but tearing them out of their lives. Ripping them away from their families, away from even the pretence of having a choice in who they were or what they could become.

She had kidnapped seventy five children and indoctrinated them into the perfect killing machines.

Oh she had any number of justifications she could throw around for her actions â€" and most of them even had a genuine level of validity to them. But a week after she had seen 30 bodies wheeled out of the operating rooms, and 12 more crippled children â€| something inside her that she had been supressing for the longest time behind an icy wall of logic had finally started to speak up.

And she had finally started to listen.

The next day, she had systematically destroyed her analysis of the augmentation failures and her preliminary conclusions on how to correct and perfect the processes. The UNSC had its superweapon, its scapple to supress the insurrection and buy the time needed for a political solution. She had done what they had asked â€" she was not going to give them the means to start pumping out hundreds more Spartans. To destroy hundreds more lives.

Then the Covenant had come. The insurrection had become almost a complete non-factor overnight; with the alien cultures intentions apparently the destruction of humanity, all strategic projections showed the vast bulk of the insurrection based worlds would have little choice but to ally with the UEG for their own survival. After the first ground campaigns had shown the power of the alien species, more than one General had tried to demand more Spartans be produced, but she had easily deflected all such requests by pointing out the sheer logistical problems with such a request, even ignoring the moral questions she knew they would mostly ignore.

Training a new class would take far too long when they needed soldiers now.

Their armour was too expensive for mass deployment.

They would never be able to screen anything like enough genetically viable candidates to mass produce them.

Perhaps it had been pure arrogance on her part to think that ONI couldn't get their hands on people who could come to the same conclusions and generate the same data that she had. Or perhaps she had underestimated Ackerson â€" she increasingly suspected that he had been keeping a much closer eye on her work than she had thought, it was not impossible that he had acquired her theoretical work on perfecting the augmentations before she had deleted them. Ultimately, it didn't really matter how it had happened. Ackerson had cracked the augmentation paradigm and developed a new method of augmentation almost as good as hers. One that had a near 100% success rate on a far looser genetic profile.

It had not of course solved the still very real problems with training children into competent Special Forces soldiers loyal to the UNSC who would not go rogue and use their abilities against the UNSC. Nor had it solved the incredible hand crafted engineering challenges of mass producing MJOLNIR armour.

So Ackerson had taken a different path entirely.

He had 'recruited' from the masses of orphaned children the Covenant had created as they systematically moved into UNSC space and glassed planet after planet. Quietly handpicking from the children who had been often saved by the ultimate sacrifices of their parents to get them out of harm's way, who had nothing left to live for or anyone who would miss them as the body count from the war skyrocketed. He had harnessed their terror, their anger at their losses and twisted it, shaped it until they willingly embraced the chance for revenge against the Covenant, eagerly seizing on the training and abilities that would let them strike back. He had not even tried to look at getting MJOLNIR technology, instead giving them enhanced ODST armour that was 'good enough' for the missions he had in mind for them.

Because these Spartans were a renewable resource.

Which made them a disposable resource.

And so he had sent them. Hundreds at a time, against the biggest and most valuable Covenant targets he could find in one way trips where their only goal was to do as much damage as possible before they were all killed.

And then another 'class' would be recruited and the process started all over again.

And again. And again.

So when all those months ago, Hood had offered her the chance to clean up the mess that was ONI, in exchange for being able to try to clean up the mess that was the Spartan III program â€| she â€"and Hood damn it- had known she had no choice at all.

It was her work.

It was her responsibility.

And that was why she was sitting now in the GROUND-OPS room despite having no real reason to be here.

She certainly wasn't needed for the mission by any means â€" and if she had wanted to keep tabs on what was happening, she could easily have done so from the comfort of her quarters or anywhere else in Reach orbit she could hook into FLEETCOM from. No, the mission was merely a convenient pretext to study the figure confidently standing in the middle of the command section of the room as he oversaw the ground operation, having been personally asked to assume overall command of the situation by no less a person than Lord Hood himself.

Colonel Urban Holland

Dressed in his standard issue UNA BDUs, the man looked both oddly out of place and yet perfectly at home in the chaos of the command centre. With minimal nods and gestures he acknowledged reports as they came in from the gaggle of naval ratings and officers around him, his eyes rarely leaving the surface of the holotable at the centre of his command section. The focus was definitely on CASTLE to be sure, but this operation had many other pieces on the board and like a great conductor, with the most minimal of gestures and glances, the Colonel kept everything moving smoothly with a minimal amount of energy, missing nothing.

A decorated combat officer, Holland had been short listed months ago as a potential commanding officer for the new Spartan Special Operations Command Division that Hood had authorized her to put together " and that people had _already_ abbreviated to 'Spartan Ops' despite the fact that the unit wasn't even official as yet. With close to five _hundred_ Spartans soon to be officially operational, it had been decided that an entire new branch was to be authorized that answered directly to Special Operations Command " the parent branch of Army Special Warfare, Naval Special Warfare and ONI Black Operations. While the Commanding officer of NAVSPECWAR, Rear Admiral Kristoff Hans had complained bitterly about losing his most powerful asset, the fact was that Catherine wasn't sure how much she trusted _anyone_ _currently_ in a position of command authority currently over her Spartans. Not after all the skeletons in the Naval Intelligence closet she had stumbled onto.

Holland had initially been flagged by Deja, her personal AI, on the singular grounds that he had absolutely nothing to do with either the Office of Naval Intelligence or the Spartans themselves, along with hundreds of other candidates who had the appropriate qualifications. What had caught her eye as she had skimmed across his file however had been the fact that he had apparently 'interacted' at some point in the past with one Captain James Ackerson - UNA.

A little digging had found a sealed ONI file that stated this interaction apparently involved Holland punching him in the face and knocking him out cold.

That had officially flagged her _interest_.

Reading on, it seemed that ONI had been in the middle of what could most charitably called a 'bank robbery' on Gamma Hydra. Black teams were at work looting any number of banks in the path of the Covenant invasion and transferring the funds back to Earth to fund ongoing 'off the book' operations - with the Covenant erasing any evidence after they glassed the worlds in question of what ONI had done. Ackerson had been deployed to support their team with several air mobile units with fighter cover " and had not had to fire so much as a warning shot " the teams getting in and out without notice by the Covenant.

>Ackersons refusal to divert his teams and cover a gap in the evacuation however had resulted in the Covenant knocking down four star liners and fifteen thousand civilians. A furious Major Holland had taken some umbrage at the Captains dismissive attitude that he had been under ONI orders and knocked him flat on the deck of the Cruiser as the fleet had fallen back " something very _very_ _few people could say they had gotten away with.

Intelligence had hushed it all up in the end to keep their dirty little secret intact, but Catherine had taken an instant liking to the man as a result.

She had short listed his name as one of four possible leaders, along with a Marine General and two senior ODSR Regimental commanders. To see how well they would handle a Spartan unit " and to test how well the Spartan IIs and IIIs could be integrated for that matter, four new units had been commissioned with the code names NOBLE, VIGILANT, CATALYST and ELEMENTAL. The Spartan III's had been equipped with horridly modified Mark IV armour suits constructed out of additional spare parts and prototype castoffs " with a few choice components from the Mark V lines. And after intense conversion training, each of the four teams had been rotated out to pair up with one of the four commanders to see which one was able to use their team most effectively, probably months ahead of time if they had been forced to wait for the first production run of Mark V suits " that were all slated for the Spartan IIs anyway. The units were not pretty to look at " in fact she wanted to destroy the things every time she set her eyes on her, by necessity, slapdash work. They were not up to the same level of capability as the Mark V technology of course. . .

But kit-bashed or not, the armour was still a quantum leap over the SPI systems they had been using and that was good enough for this testing phase. Three of the teams were still on their way to more distant systems, but NOBLE had been deployed on Reach with Holland and so had swung into action even before Winter Contingency had been declared. She had been quietly impressed by how effectively he had used his Spartans in conjunction with other forces over the last few days " despite having little time to get to know them. So much so that she had decided to throw him even deeper into the water, to see how he did with overseeing this whole operation.

If he suspected he was being measured up for General's Stars, he had not said anything, instead simply getting down to the job with crisp clear commands and dealing with her presence mostly by ignoring it.

Smiling slightly for a brief moment, she turned back to her computer as a soft chime sounded indicating an incoming message. A slight gesture with her fingers switched screens on his station to bring it up. She opened it " and felt her frown mutate into an expression of much more serious concentration when she at once saw there was no sender ID, no routing code, yet it had somehow snaked its way to her personal terminal through the highly secure FLEETCOM system. And as she opened up the message and started to read, her face tightened as it became clear very quickly that Cortana's 'friends' had come up with something unexpected.

First was a neatly summarized audit report from the Fairchild airbase AI that detailed eight Hornet Special Operations gunships had been signed out by an ONI Special Action unit.

Which was rather interesting as to the best of her knowledge all of the remaining ONI paramilitary units busy cleaning up combat zones, policing Covenant technology or interrogating the few prisoners captured " certainly nothing that would require an Omega-level approval code or heavy hardware like this.

Even more curiously, according to the timestamps on the audit report, the gunships that had gone missing had been logged out after the Covenant threat had been eliminated.

But what sent the first alarm bells ringing in her head was another datapoint attached to the file that she opened. It was a still frame from a distant security camera that had captured a relatively non-descript man being waved through the gates at Farchild airfield by the Marines on station there. This was clearly not one of the security cameras on the airfield itself " but probably a civilian camera from outside the security perimeter of the airbase. It showed the distinct signs of having been put together from multiple frames and enhanced " and it was both at an oblique angle and some range to boot. Yet she felt a sudden chill course down her spine as she none the less was instantly able to identify the unsmiling face of Colonel James Ackerson, leading at least a dozen or more heavily armed soldiers in SPC armour.

And as far as she knew, there was only one Special Operations division that had access to SPC armour technology.

Moving down quickly through the message, she saw a planet wide track of the aircraft after they had taken off. The data was incomplete thanks to the giant holes blown in the Reach ATC network by the Covenant, but it was enough to see the general direction they were heading before they had vanished off the radars for the last time, nowhere near where their filed flight plan said they were going. And it was almost immediately clear that they had been heading more or less directly for the extremely remote region where CASTLE sat " within an hour of when she had left the base and placed it on lockdown.

And then she came to the final datapoint. It was an ONI report marked as EYES ONLY " CICONI dated from the reign of Admiral Luke O'Donnell about the compartment known as KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN. And her blood now turned cold as she realized it was a memo from the Admiral regarding one Captain James Ackerson, one of the lead officers overseeing it, regarding his continued insistence that the project be continued, the insistence that there was indeed something under CASTLE worth the time and effort being put into it, with the unconvinced Admiral reassigning all assets to the newly discovered alien ruins in the Zeta Doradus system.

Catherine Halsey stared at the unblinking lines of text on her monitor for several long moments in shock " and that moment of inactivity would turn out to be yet another regret to add to the growing pile she carried around with her life. Because her next thought was that the team on the surface needed to know this. So with her usual ruthless ability to focus in on the most direct action to take, she started to pull up a COM window that would let her forward this message in its entirety to Cortana via Blue Teams SATCOM uplink. Cortana, still riding around in the back of Johns head, would need only nanoseconds to parse the data and come to the same conclusions she had and brief the Spartans, saving precious time that they may not have to spare. Then she would inform Colonel Holland.

Except that single moment of shock that had stayed her hands for a precious handful of seconds.

Because as she started to trigger the simple commands that would

forward this message down to Cortana, the COM board flashed from green to yellow.

"Uplink severed â€" Sierra Team is now dark, awaiting reacquisition of signal" one of the communications technicians called out across the room from somewhere and Catherine Halsey fought back the extremely rare urge to swear. The ground team and their guests from the _Odyssey_ must have just started the elevator down into the base. After the first armour layer sealed closed behind them, a full electronic shield would have gone back into place, cutting off all external communications behind increasing layers of EM shielded Titanium-A plating.

Meaning that they were, until they gained full access to the CASTLE Base communications system, entirely out of contact.
>But not necessarily beyond help.

Looking up from her board, she gazed across the room at Colonel Holland and, after a few seconds as his eyes swept around the room, caught his gaze. With the briefest of examinations of the expression on her face, the Colonel nodded, stepping away from his station to calmly but quickly walking up the narrow stairs to her station to join her, an expression of expectation on his face

"Colonel â€" we have a problem" she began, quickly launching into an abbreviated summary of the information she had just been delivered.

Ninety seconds later, an explosion or secure COM transmissions erupted from the _Pillar of Autumn_ in every direction. Most critically, was a secure beam that bounced off a high orbit COMSAT to a Pellican coming around from the far side of the planet and direction of the recently secured Gamma Station, with a transponder that signalled it belonged to Special Operations Warfare Command Group Three.

Ten seconds after receiving the transmission, the Pelicans overthrusters ignited and the assault ships nose yawed around into a precariously steep dive towards Reach as a course correction was initiated; one that would describe a brutal arc through the atmosphere and terminate on the surface of the planet, at the coordinates for CASTLE Base.

* * *

><p>That Same time, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)

>CASTLE BASE Primary Access Shaft
Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.**

Cortana frowned.

Well that wasn't to say she _actually_ frowned. Without any need to project an Avatar at this point in time, it would be more accurate to say that she approximated the feeling in her runtimes, but none the less, the first thought that came to mind was that of a 'frown'.

It was generally a quite happy pastime for AIs to spend their copious spare time musing on philosophical questions, such as if the instinctive response to how they 'felt' were a result of their

'donors' neural structures, or, their own understanding of such things " and later discussing their conclusions with any number of other AIs.

But right now, even an AI as sophisticated as she was didn't have the time to dawdle.

Because the distinctive sound of the elevator car passing by one of the opened armor plates and creating a subtle change in the sound of air moving outside the car " had come 0.2 seconds early.

Impatiently, she waited as the milliseconds ground past as the MJOLNIR armours inbuilt atomic clock patiently kept time until " there!

Now the distinctive 'whoosh!' had come 0.4 seconds early.

That was not good.

"Chief, we have a problem" she started, cutting out his helmets external speakers and radio as she did so.

"What is it?" the Spartan asked with his typically stoic and unflappable tone.

"We're moving too fast" she explained succinctly. "This car is in freefall without any control".

Even the most experienced soldiers would have been awfully tempted to ask questions like 'Are you sure?' or 'How can you possibly know that?'

Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan John-117 however, was not most soldiers.

The Chief flashed his status light orange twice a heartbeat later. No Spartan in the car showed the slightest outward sign of noticing. Not even Vincent or Malcom who were engaged in a quite cordial conversation with Lieutenant Colonel Cameron Mitchell and the rest of his team over Covenant infantry and what to expect showed the slightest break in their chatter. But every Spartan flashed their own status lights back once to signal their attention. Double yellow was the signal for 'stand to and prepare for orders, do not react' and the Chief quickly cut in the Spartans TEAMCOM channel, while double checking his helmets speakers were still shut down.

"Cortana reports that this car is in a freefall " we may have been sabotaged. Kelly; emergency stop".

Kelly, the closest Spartan to the control panel next to the door flashed her light blue and with a casual economy of motion that the SGCs personnel on the other side of the elevator car wouldn't notice, reached up and tapped the button.

The button in turn flashed once as it should " but the sudden squeal of breaks clamping on and activating and a sudden rough deceleration that _should _have occurred at that " didn't.

"Negative on the breaks Chief" Kelly replied unnecessarily. A slow roaring noise was building outside as the elevator continued to accelerate. The air in the narrow shaft it was having to bash out of its way kept the terminal velocity much lower than it could have been, not really that much faster than it normally descended the three kilometres into the crust of Reach â€| but that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that the magnetic induction system that kept their speed controlled was also responsible for slowing and stopping them at the end of the trip. And if this car hit the bottom of the shaft at its current speed â€|

"There are four safety interlock circuits to the breaks" Cortana pointed out over TEAMCOM now as she rapidly reviewed the specifications for CASTLE Vice Admiral Stanforth had uploaded to her before the mission from SWORD Base's archives. "The elevator should not have even started if the emergency brakes were damaged in any way. And if the magnetic induction system is not controlling our descent..."

"Sabotage" Fred concluded grimly. And he was right to sound grim; this entire mission had just possibly run into a fatal problem when it had barely started.

"It looks like the systems have been shut down rather than physically damaged" Cortana pointed out â€" without adding that this was simply her probability assessment and there was a 39% chance they had been physically disabled.

In which case, they were screwed. Best not to dwell on that and just trust that Johns logic defying luck would continue to hold true.

"If there is no physical damage, I should be able to remotely access the systems from here via the data port in the control panel" she continued.

"Understood" John responded, shifting quickly through the crowded elevator to the control panel. In a blur of motion he slid back a part of the gantlet on his left hand, pulling a standard UNSC data jack out and spooling out the fibre optic cable behind it.

"Something going on fellas?" Colonel Mitchell put in as the conversation faltered on the other side of the elevator. John kept working and didn't turn, but he did reactivate his external speakers.

"The lift has been sabotaged â€" we are currently in a freefall" the Chief explained directly as he pulled off the access panel and quickly found the standard network port that would let them access the elevator systems. "We are going to try and arrest our fall by overriding the systems".

"Ah" the Colonel replied and, with exquisite tact, did not ask further before reaching up to his radio. "SG One Ninner to Odyssey, we have a situation here"

"We're inside the shielded section of the base now Colonel" Cortana cut in as the Chief worked to patch her in, Cortana trying to hide

her impatience as time ticked away steadily and brought them closer to the rather hard landing she would rather avoid. Even the Spartans in their suits would be hard put to survive such an impact, especially with the elevator car collapsing around them. The guests from the _Odyssey_ stood no chance at all. "Radio signals will not penetrate".

"Is there _any_ way we can get a message out?" the Colonel asked quickly as he glanced uneasily at the floor, as if able to see the bedrock rapidly approaching. "We can have the Odyssey beam us all out of here and back to the surface"

"Did not Colonel Carter say it would be too risky to engage the transporter below ground".

"She did" Mitchell agreed. "But I'll take that risk over smashing into the ground".

"The point's academic" Malcom, the communications expert of the team put in. "We don't have anything that could punch a message through all the EM shielding".

Cortana kept a virtual ear open on the conversation as John finally made the connection. In milliseconds she was in, bridging a LAN connection to the MJOLNIR layer she resided in and flowing out into the base network " or at least the small part she could access.

And then crashed into a brick wall.

She paused as she rapidly assessed the situation in confusion. The elevator systems were all tied into the same network subnet for security purposes. She should not have had any problems accessing the magnetic induction system, but for some reason, the network paths were locked out, making it impossible even for a Smart AI to try and get through.

And as deadly serious as the situation was, Cortana could not help but feel a little thrill.

She _loved_ a challenge.

An explosion of connection requests slammed out from her virtual presence against the local node serving this part of the CASTLE ancillary systems, throwing a million pings at it in a second. The ONI computer scientists who had designed the network of course had hardly been blind to the dangers of things as thuggishly simple as a denial of service request of course and local automatic cyber-warfare expert systems built into the node activated in response, locking down the LAN into standby and reconfiguring the topography to isolate the node from the greater WAN. Unfortunately, the designers had never anticipated that a Smart AI of her abilities who knew the CASTLE network inside and outside would try to get in. And so as the network reconfigured, she squirted in a perfectly valid data packet with exquisite timing that she should not have possibly known, intercepting and overwriting the properly authenticated upstream command to reconfigure the network in a _slightly_ _different_ way than it had planned.

Now the local network node unlocked obediently for her as she

presented her credentials to the system, logging in to the local utility system as she tried to ascertain what the devil was going on with the elevator and how to fix it.

It didn't take long to figure out.

The power system was stuck in a diagnostic cycle " but the safety interlock was being fed a data loop that made it think that the elevator was sitting at the top of the shaft without anything happening, bypassing the automatic lockdown of the elevator car that would otherwise have prevented it from being used.

It was very " cute. Almost ingenious really. Unusually subtle for Covenant work " and that thought bothered her for some reason.

But she would worry about it later as she virtually navigated to the power systems for the elevator shaft and opened a connection.

Then the connection exploded.

Virtually of course, like all things 'exploded' was a metaphor for what actually happened. Instead of a standard connection dance where she sent her credentials and it in turn logged her in to let her fix the problems, an explosion of counter-privilege attacks scathed across her access, starting to reconfigure the network like quicksand, shifting everything around and cutting her off. Reacting with lightning speed, she countered in a blur of action, and a surge of something approximating adrenalin passed through her emotional subroutines as it became clear in milliseconds that this sudden vicious counter attack was no simple automatic counter-intrusion system.

This could only be the work of an AI.

A million 'blows' were traded as milliseconds passed, Cortana rapidly recovering from the vicious attack that had rocked her back on her feet as she cut loose with everything she had and everything she was. Doctor Halsey had designed her to be the ultimate computer intrusion expert and the full force of her abilities was unleashed in a wave of attacks across the network. She moved like both an intangible ghost and an unstoppable wall as she pushed back hard across thousands of nodes, tearing apart some attacks while deflecting others, testing and teasing the other AI even as she parried its attacks. A maddeningly familiar sensation rippled through her core as she studied the opposing attack strategy and to her astonishment, they codified into a clear ONI cyber-war attack paradigms.

Could the Covenant have captured " no; that made no sense. This had to be an ONI AI set up in CASTLE, fighting for some insane reason to kill the Spartans and the crew of the Odyssey " _despite _the stand down order Hoods ultra-clearance codes had generated.

It made no sense; those codes were _absolute _there was no way a loyal ONI AI-

Then it suddenly hit her.

Indeed, there was no _loyal _ONI AI that would be doing something like this. And all of the reports that she had palmed off onto the Assembly to follow up on about-

/Araziel/ she snarled across the global TIME_SYNCH protocol. It was a completely useless thing for any kind of cyberwar work, but as almost every computer on the base was linked to it on some level, it would serve remarkably well for communications purposes. Concurrently, she kicked her attacks into high gear, increasingly anticipating and countering the others efforts. He could only slow her down, not stop her " not in the long run, but he might be able to slow her down enough that it became irrelevant. /I see we've found the hole Colonel Ackerson is hiding down/

\\PERHAPS SO\\ an update almost instantly overwrote her message as the other AI, as she had predicted, fatally took the opportunity to gloat, confirming its presence as it 'knew' that she would die soon and not be able to tell anyone. Much like Colonel Ackerson was always striving to one up Doctor Halsey, so too was his pet taking on some of the bad character attributes of the Colonel. So much the better.

>\\AND IN THIRTY SECONDS YOUR HOLE WILL BECOME YOUR TOMB\\<p>

/How droll/ she replied, almost contemptuously blocking an attempt to reconfigure the network topology to block her advance. It was an uphill battle; Araziel still controlled the vast bulk of the network and defensive systems that had been built to deal with this kind of attack, giving it the high ground. But no-one had ever anticipated someone like _her_ getting a hard link and she danced through his attacks and sent blistering attacks of her own back, dynamically alerting and adjusting her attacks on the fly in ways that the dullard simply couldn't keep up with, across multiple levels and multiple fronts. You're just like your Master Araquel " such a pity that

\\COLONEL ACKERSON IS A GREAT MAN. HE'S-\\

/Alone/ Cortana snaked back, working to keep Araziel off balance and focused on her, even as she felt a delicate wave of pings ripple against her outer core that she knew were _not_ from the other AI furiously grappling with her over thousands of connections and systems. The truth in fact was that even _she_ couldn't break through this many layers of firewalls and network grids to get to the power systems for the elevator in time. And even if she could, nothing would stop the AI from enacting a MAD scenario and simply burning out the systems or otherwise shutting them off to ensure that she joined Araziel in death.

But the critical flaw in the AIs otherwise flawless logic as it traded network space for time, was that she was _also_ alone. And as she seized control of a primary junction node, she smiled.

Virtually anyway.

Because as proud as she was of her abilities, John had taught her a useful lesson a few days ago about teamwork.

/Bazinga/ she announced over the TIME_SYNCH channel. And for a nanosecond she thought she could feel the confusion and bewilderment coming from the other AI. It was a completely nonsensical statement, not found in any dictionary she knew of. It was one of Doctor Halseys eccentricities, the use of words known only to a handful of people - and AIs - around her.

And within a few more nanoseconds of her saying it, Kalmiya crashed their private little duel performing the AI equivalent of a King Hit on Ackersons pet.

Cortanas older 'sister', Kalmiya had been the prototype for all of her cyber warfare and computer intrusion technology. She was not based on Doctor Halseys mental patterns as she was, but she _was_ _none the less_ incredibly formidable, Doctor Halsey having tapped her as her new personal AI after the ONI shakeup had given her rather more freedom in being able to deploy a personal AI unshackled by the programing constraints most ONI AIs operated under. One on one she probably wouldn't have been a match for Araquel, but with Ackersons personal AI rather busy with its processing power focused entirely on the arm wrestle with Cortana, the sudden stab in the back was rather brutal.

And at once, Cortana was all over him.

Desperately, the other AI rallied as he tried to pull himself together and retreat deeper into the core network, throwing a half dozen 'Dumb' AIs into their path as the sisters rampaged after him. The other AIs, lower level administrative systems slaved to Araquels matrix, were barely speed bumps but in that role they performed well as Araquel retreated and tried to regroup, throwing up an absurd number of blocking signals, kill code traps and signal loops as he tried to re-establish a new bastion of firewalls around himself on a secure network partition, going fully on the defensive.

None of it helped as she and her sister followed it right back to the primary server room and prepared to tear the damn thing to bits, decompile its ass and figure out exactly what was going on with Ackerson on Reach, once and for all.

But as the two AIs reached out for him with murder in their digital eyes, Araquel did the only thing it could. It triggered a power surge that blew the LAN links into the server room it was physically housed in, brutally separating itself and its secrets from the AIs chasing it.

Cortana glared at the sudden red lines on her topographical map showing the severing of the connection.

"Well that's annoying" she complained to her Sister. She _hated_ leaving work half doneâ€|

"He'll keep" the other offered a digital shrug. "I didn't even know he was still down here".

"Do _you_ have any idea what's been going on since Halsey left?" Cortana asked in interest as she flew into the main utility systems and checked the power systems. Thankfully, the reversal had been both sudden and completed; Araquel had not had time to do any damage to the system. Quickly, she eliminated the data loop and diagnostic cycle, requesting an immediate crash power up cycle to arrest the fall of the elevator.

"No â€" I was on standby until you two started taunting each other" she admitted. "And it looks like the security and movement logs were all re-routed to Araquel directly".

"Of course they were" she processed the equivalent of a sigh. "Let me fill you in on the situation" she offered, accessing Kalmiyas upload directory and starting to copy across everything she would need to understand what was going on. She was going to need some help trying to figure _this _one out.

A pulse of approval came across from her sister as she turned her attention to devouring the files with scarcely less hunger to the data than she herself would have had and Cortana turned her attention back to the Chief.

The good news was that the entire cyber warfare situation had only taken twenty or so milliseconds to resolve in the end. Which left her plenty of time to try and figure out exactly _how_ she was going to help the Chief explain to the crew members of the _Odyssey_ that the UNSC had just tried to have them all killed.

8. Chapter 8

****Chapter 5.**** With your shield &| or on it - Part II.

****04:21 Hours, March 16th, 97,445 BCE (Military Calendar) /
>Former Builder Forge # 991
'Blunted Hammer'****

Silentium.

The absence of activity.

The absence of purpose.

The absence of life.

Across a Galaxy that had once roared with noise, there was now only a deafening silence.

In a single moment, all that could have been, should have been and would have been had been stilled. With the brutal finality of day passing into night. And in the darkness of that long night, a single figure strode through a complex deep under the surface of a world.

Once, the shimmering silver walls of the complex had sung with power and purpose. It had been here some of the greatest Builders had teased and tested out the very building blocks of the universe itself. The Master Slip-space crystal which had mediated all slip-space activity across the Ecumene had even been maintained here, for a time. Countless slip-space flakes budded from it installed into the heart of so many starships. So too had the founding principals behind the Halo array been discovered, an outgrowth of the crude first successes of the Builders forays into Neural Physics.

There was a true irony that a large part of the contempt Builders had for Warrior-Servants had been their absolute belief that creation was a far harder thing than destruction. That they were thus more aligned with the path the Mantle of Responsibility dictated, more _evolved_ even, than those whose only task was in their minds, to destroy.

And yet the figure striding through the darkness recalled bitterly

that they had been so very proud of their discovery of the Halo effect. Fabber saluting his rate as they had unveiled their greatest ever creation; the ability to destroy on a Galactic scale - on a whim.

The figure paused for a moment as that thought passed through him. A flicker of a hand gesture invoked all shades of dark irony, before he proceeded once again through the echoing corridors.

Little was now left of the great forges that had once sung with life across much of this world. Most had been removed or destroyed in advance of the parasites incursion into this part of the Galaxy and what little was left had not even been worth the attention of their enemy beyond a cursory infestation. Even now, most of the empty shells were being filled in with molten rock, erasing millennia of work in moments to leave only one small complex. Shielded and hidden.

Hard Light walls faded and vanished at his approach, more solid doors behind them opening slowly to reveal the vast cavern being prepared under his exact specifications. Twelve great galleries were, even as he watched, being spun out of the walls of the complex by swarms of sentinels and constructors. On the vast ceiling overhead a particle synthesis was being refined, reflecting what -hopefully- one day would be the sky of this world after the environment recovered from the total obliteration of the Halo Effect. On the floor, glyphs were being inscribed by the tens of thousands, a story and a warning to those who would one day come here, written in a transcendent material that would serve to contain slipspace anomalies.

Bornstellar-Makes-Eternal-Lasting, known also as Iso-Didact, nodded in approval.

Everything was as it should be.

Everything was exactly as she wanted it to be.

"**It is done**" a voice that seemed to ripple through the facility from everywhere stated as he came to a halt at the edge of the crystal floor.

"Let me see it" he asked aloud as he continued to observe the choreography of constructs hard at work, all operating under the direction of a number of Engineers floating and making adjustments of their own.

"**Do you doubt my oversight?**" the voice asked?

From anyone else, such a comment might have been filled with scorn, wounded pride or hurt at the implication that he didn't trust its abilities.

Offensive Bias however did not get hurt. It hurt others. Wounded pride was something it had been denied as part of its makeup, unlike its treacherous older brother.

"No, I simply wish to see it" he clarified.

With no more discussion, a deep humming built up. Glancing up,

Bornstellar watched the Ancilla descend from its place up high where it had been overseeing the work. A far larger frame than the roughly head sized units used by most Installation level Ancillas, this framework was still too small to store but a small shard of the Contender class construct. Even so, the awesome presence of the metarch seemed to study him from behind the trio of eyes that dispassionately watched over everything.

The underside of the Monitor casing unfolded into nothing as it came to a hover, a brilliant point of blue light dropping free. Held in a constraint field, it drifted down to float directly in front of Bornstellar, shimmering with a radiant inner light as it gently rotated in place.

The Ancilla had indeed done good work, Bornstellar could see. His eyes that had been once trained to take a place in the highest levels of Builder society studied it carefully, knowing that there would be no second chances to get this right.

He needn't have bothered of course; the crystal was clearly as precisely calibrated as his wife's incredibly demanding specifications required, the task childishly simple for such a vast intelligence to perform. The relative simplicity of the task he had put to the Ancilla contrasting with the great importance of this final act.

_Her _last request of him.

He and Growth-Through-Trial-of-Change had finished re-seeding the humans onto their ancient homeworld days ago. He had bidden a final goodbye to Riser and his people, taking heart in their stoic determination to start over once more before taking to his ship, leaving the future to their choices and their hands.

But he had not headed back to the Lesser Arc with Trial. At least not immediately.

Instead, he had circled around the planet to his Wife's final resting place, where her ship had already dissolved itself into the rich soil of Erde-Tyrene. A vast construct was slowly taking form as the seed she had planted grew deep roots, constructing and building a little more with every day in a process that would take a great deal of time - but time was certainly one thing the Galaxy now had in abundance.

He had not expected to find her body and indeed he had not; there was no escape from the fire of Halo. Even _if _it had left the smallest remains, they had no doubt been rendered down by the chemical soup Lifeworkers had seeded to allow the biosphere to rapidly be broken down and replenished. In truth, as much as anything else, he had thought to come to pay his final respects.

To apologise, for his unforgivable failure to save her. And perhaps assure her shade that despite the high price, her children had indeed returned home and would be allowed to truly start again, as she had desired.

He should have known better of course. At the exact location of her final signal, was a data module with exact, specific instructions that had unlocked and activated at _his_ approach, flooding his

combat skins ancilla with detailed instructions. It was clearly planned to be. So much so that he had wondered if she had somehow placed a very subtle Geas on him, having anticipated this outcome well in advance.

>After all, she had been making him unknowingly move to her will for both of his lives; why would something so minor an inconvenience as death stop her from continuing?

The instructions in question had led him here. Where he had, one last time, carefully set the great forges into motion to construct the missing piece of his wife's legacy - and in an odd way, finding himself honouring his race one last time as a Warrior Servant, Lifeshaper _and_ Builder.

It was fitting that this final legacy for the humans would be touched and shaped by all the facets of the Forerunners.

"**Do you think they will find it**?"

Bornstellar brought his gaze away from the mysterious crystal to the Ancilla hovering off to the side.

"I am sure of it" he answered at last. "Humans have an almost impossible to suppress desire to explore. To, as Riser put it, go and see what is over the next hill. And if there is another hill, to go and see what is beyond that one. This world" he raised an arm briefly to take in the chamber, "is one of the logical worlds to visit from Erde-Tyrene when they eventually redevelop Slipspace technology. And once they reach that point of technology ... they deserve to know the truth. All of the truth".

"**The most predominant desire the humans have is the desire to control. To destroy. Not to explore**" the Ancilla retorted with a pulse of light. "**Their short sighted, self defeating and self destructive behaviour was self-evident during their war with us**".

The reminder caused the Isodidact to frown slightly. With perfect recall 'he' could well recall leading the fleets into battle through the chaos of Charum Hakkor, the bloody cost the Lord of Admirals had demanded for his final defeat. So many ships, so _many_ _soldiers_ lost.

But had they not paid thrice for that?

Laid low; from an Empire that once rivaled the Forerunners to primitives living in wooden huts. Tortured by the Master Builder in his mad quest to find a cure for the Flood for an eon, taken en mass to the 'houses of pain' as they became known? Then harvested by _his_ _dark shadow, rebuilt by the Composer into twisted playthings in the mad quest to try and find a way to take on the Flood before their Wife had stopped him.

And had they not changed - _genuinely_ _changed_ - from their ancestors?

"These humans are not the humans you studied, from the battles and war we fought against them" Bornstellar asserted easily, turning his gaze back to the crystal and, with a gesture of his own constraint field, sending it floating slowly to the plinth where it would wait

until claimed. "_She _has assured me that those who will rise will be quite different from those who came before. Her chosen Reclaimers _will _prove worthy of the title - or do you doubt her planning?"

Of course, he could not, would not, tell Offensive Bias of the secret she had entrusted to him the last night they had spent together before she had decided to make 'just one last run' to try and save a few more precious finite souls from the Floods ever hastening rampage. Of her encounter as a young Lifeworker. Of where her absolute confidence in just what humans could become one day if given the chance truly came from. Something not even his 'other' self had known.

Because it was not his secret to tell.

"**I would be hard pressed to do so**" the Ancilla admitted after an unusually long pause. "**She is one of the greatest strategists of this era. Builders, Prometheans, Lifeshapers even the Flood at one time or another have fallen victim to her manipulations. It is indeed **_**only**_** because of her involvement with these humans, the Geas she has implanted into some of them, that I have positive expectations. Butâ€|**"

"But?" a slightly amused Bornstellar prompted the Ancilla, wondering exactly what his wife would have made of the grudging respect for her abilities as a strategist the metarch clearly held.

"**But accessing this world and, accordingly, the Librarians legacy will require substantial advancement from their current state. To at least Tier 4 on the Lifeworker development index, more likely Tier 3. With no guidance, no oversight. The odds of them destroying themselves are considerable - humans by nature look for challenges and if they cannot find them from outside, they will find them in each other. With the bulk of the Geas modified humans from Omega Halo lost to your other self, a critical single point of failure has been introduced into this plan that was not anticipated. The future will turn on â€| chance. Rather than design**".

Offensive Bias did not sound pleased with that conclusion.

"History is filled with turning points" Bornstellar replied. "In our arrogance, perhaps that was our greatest mistake. Presuming that history would never, could never, turn against _us. _And in our blind refusal to accept the possibility, deluding ourselves until we set in motion the events that destroyed us. Control, _absolute _control, is little more than absolute stagnation. The humans have been given the tools needed to rise up once again, but it is _their _choice if they use them. Their choice if they take on the mantle that we now relinquish as life crawls its way out of the seas on millions of worlds once again. Perhaps â€| the future will benefit from a little chaos mixed into the planning? A clean start, free of Forerunner and Flood".

"**You are asking me to take a leap of faith?**" the other rumbled. Surprised, Bornstellar turned back to face the Ancilla as it continued to speak. "**To trust that things will unfold as they should on the basis of an unqualifiable belief that it simply **_**will **_**happen**".

"You think me a fool for thinking it? Of asking it of _you_, a

creature of pure intellect?"

"**I would think you a fool if you tried to claim your plan did not rest on such an assumption**" the other retorted, but with a rare undercurrent of amusement threaded through its voice, almost turning strangely wistful "**But I have seen your wife take such leaps before and succeed against all my calculations. Against all logic. Perhaps it is fitting that as we leave this place, we will take one last leap together**".

"Aya, so shall it be" Bornstellar nodded, waving his hand. With his gesture, the Crystal finally reached its goal to rest on its own inertial reference frame, starting to spin slowly in a perfect dilated pocket of time and space. Power shimmered through the room before being contained and fed back upon itself, the flocks of sentinels in the air bobbing slightly as their antigravity waves were disrupted, to the chirped annoyance of the engineers supervising them out as they finished up their work before vanishing in brief slipspace rips. As they vanished, the Sentinels then started to subsume themselves into the surface of the galleries, adding the last of the material and equipment needed. "Our time as guardians is over my friend. However heinous the sin we have both committed, life now will have its chance to begin anew".

With a thought he sent the final signal to what little was left of the facilities on this world to go into standby state to wait the thousands, tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of years it would take for Risers descendants to one day look up at the stars and dare to Reach out to them. A long range link to Installation 00 and from there to the rest of the array rebroadcast it across the Galaxy; instructing the remaining Forerunner outposts left behind that could hear it to sleep and wait for the Reclaimers to rise.

With all was as it should be, he took one final long look around and determined everything was the Librarian had asked of him. Satisfied, he turned to nod one last time to the brooding Ancilla, who in turn flashed his 'eyes' once in acknowledgement of all they had seen and done together, both knowing that they would never see each other again as each had their own purpose and path from this place. Sealing his armour, he triggered the slipspace translocation systems high above and in a swirl of golden light he vanished and then reappeared on board his long range transport, docked to Offensive Bias's flagship. Compared to that _Fortress_ class monster, his ship was tiny â€| but she was clever, fast and had range greater than anything else in the Forerunners remaining fleet. Range sufficient to rival his wife's former ship, the _Audacity_, which he would need.

The reseedling of the other species stored on the Lesser Arc could be done by the Lifeworkers and their fleet of Keyships. _He_ had a journey ahead of him.

A Great Journey.

With a thought, his ship detached from the hoards of other parasites nestled down the spine of the mighty warship, pushing through the outer hard-light shell with barely a tremble, the sleek looking blue craft basking in the sunlight of the distant primary as it aligned on a nearby slipspace portal. With a second thought, said portal blossomed opened in a flare of radiation and light, beckoning him forward. He spared a final look down at the planet below, the first

hints of blue starting to appear through its murky atmosphere as the Strato-Sentinels continued their work.

One day, the humans would reach this world. And if his faith in his wife was correct, then a Reclaimer worthy of her would step forth to claim the key to their future.

**15:10 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
/**

Unknown Forerunner Facility underneath CASTLE BASE

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

Colonel James Ackerson looked at the crystal spinning slowly on its pedestal and smiled.

All the risks he had taken. The bridges he had burned. The sacrifices he had made over the years; all of it seemed to come down to this moment of vindication. The Forerunner base in the Jericho system had been extraordinary of course, that damned insane bridge made of pure light was something he would never forget.

But the sheer personal satisfaction paled in comparison to this. The proof that key to defeating the Covenant had been under their noses the entire time on Reach made this moment something special.

More's the pity that the fools in ONI hadn't listened to him so many years ago. So many lives wasted, so many planets lost because they hadn't followed his recommendations, sneering at the 'waste of time and effort' - almost certainly because he was UNA rather than UNSC.

Now however, he would correct their short sighted mistakes.

It was always nice when a plan came together.

"Colonel?" a slightly nervous voice called, breaking the moment. He mentally sighed, but turned anyway, knowing it was probably time to get back to work and stop indulging in gloating.

"Yes Doctor?"

Doctor Chalmers stumbled up to him, nervously looking at her computer. Which was, he mused, how she looked at just about everything.

"Colonel, I'm getting a constant low-level EM from inside the boundary of that floor" she pointed at the blue tiles, engraved with glyphs and words in what he knew now was a Forerunner language of some kind. "Readings zero out at the edge, so I'm guessing it's directing or shielding it in some way".

"Is it dangerous?" he asked impatiently.

"There's no way of knowing" Chalmers responded with refreshingly blunt honesty for once. "The frequencies are broadly in the same range as UNSC slipspace cores put out, some kind of high-order neutrinos and intermittent pulses of Chekernov radiation I really wish I had an AI on hand right now to analyse-

"Well, we'll know soon enough" he shrugged and ignoring Chalmers sudden cry of objection, he stepped across the threshold. "So far so good" he observed dryly as he started forward, a curt hand gesture having the nearby fire team under Kerry-B303 fall in with him. "Come along Doctor, tempus fugit". He turned away before he saw Chalmers roll her eyes, but was sure she would have done so as she followed him across the barrier at the edge of the great room.

That's when things started to go â€| strange.

The cavern was so huge it didn't even feel as if it was underground, especially with that perfectly realistic looking sky on the ceiling shining down cheerfully at them, despite the fact that this entire region was covered in thick smog. The ground itself, despite _looking _perfectly smooth under his feet seemed to shift ever so slightly, almost causing him to stumble a couple of times. The oddest sense of vertigo came over him, as if the room itself was shifting, rotating entirely on its axis ever so slightly with each step he took.

"This is â€| weird" Chalmers put in from the back of their group and, for once, Ackerson fully agreed with her. _Weird _was indeed the word.

Even more bizarrely, the crystal itself â€| didn't seem to be getting any closer no matter how much he increased his pace-

"_Sir, we're losing cohesion_" a voice cut in over his line and Ackerson stopped, turned and to his surprise, found that instead of the close group, everyone seemed scattered over a dozen or so meters.

"Regroup" he ordered and slightly clumsily, they fell back into formation. "Chalmers, what in the _hell _is going on?"

"I didn't build the place Colonel" she pointed out as she waved scanner of some kind around. "Everyone stay perfectly still for a while" she ordered and busied herself with the scanner. Ackerson bit back a reply about her giving orders with some effort, knowing that this was her battlefield, not his. Instead, lifting his MA5K and with automatic actions, releasing the magazine, checking the ammo and reloading it, the gesture vaguely reassuring as the ground seemed to gently tilt this way or that way without the slightest hint of movement on any of his sensors.

"I don't have any hard data to work with" Chalmers finally spoke up. "But based on what I'm feeling, I'm guessing that the crystals rotation and these â€| tiles â€| are somehow causing a disruption in time and space around us. Similar to some of the â€| things â€| that happened around unshielded slipspace cores on UNSC ships".

"Suggestions?" he marshaled his patience, trying not to think about how _close _he was...

"Follow me" she said. "Go VISOR and stick single file".

Turning, Chalmers started to slowly walk off to the side Ackerson shot the blank visors of the Spartan IIIs a signal to fall in behind him as he switched his helmet over. Quietly they walked and then, all

of the sudden everything seemed normal again and he realized Chalmers had stopped.

"Okay, we're clear" she breathed a sigh of relief and Ackerson frowned, glancing up as he reset his helmet display to VisLight.

Sure enough, they were right back where they started with the other fire team of Spartan IIIs patiently waiting as Chalmers moved over to join the excited looking techs to compare data.

"Damnit Chalmers" he snapped, frustration boiling through as being so _close_ yet being denied. "I wanted to get _to _the Crystal, not _away _from it!"

"Sometimes in science -and I'm sure in combat- you need to take a step backwards before you can take two steps forward" she defended herself as she started work on a field workstation. "I was able to follow the pure visual record of our route to lead us back here, but the INS systems were all over the place, completely different as we went in and out! And â€| none of my suits data matches up with this data from outside. It's almost like time and space were, for lack of a better word, fractured in there. And it'll probably get worse the closer we get - so if we go in blind, we might not be able to _get _back out again. Like, uh, light being bent around a black hole. The writing on the tiles _may _be a map of some kind through the disruption. So please let me work".

Ackerson bit his tongue once again. She was correct, after all, much as it rankled. This was her ballpark, her battleground, so he let her chatter away with her technicians as she started running a new series of tests on the data.

All he could do was wait and stare at the crystal. Serenely rotating in place, just out of reach. He knew time wasn't on his side -was running _out-_ but there was nothing he could do.

Nothing but wait.

****15:15 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

****CASTLE BASE****

****Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.****

There were few sights that could make someone hostile to the UEG _fear _like a Spartan II commando in MJOLNIR armor. The most indifferently hardcore Insurrectionists for example, were smart enough to just walk away and go to ground if news got around that Spartans were in the area. Even the most brash young Elites looking to make a name for themselves would generally stop and think very carefully about their next step when told a 'demon' had taken to the field.

Brutes wouldn't care, but other Covenant client races were perfectly happy to let them go first and, at the least, cost the demons some ammo...

As such, it meant that if somehow knew that _multiple_ Spartan IIs in their brand new Mark V armor suits were about to breach the door in

front of them in a somewhat irritated mood, most sane sapient beings would find somewhere else to be.

Rapidly.

_Eight _Spartans crowded the doorway of the lift shaft as it slid open. Four on their knees in the front rank and four more standing beside them, their weapons tracking downrange as the doors slid open, ready to turn anything stupid enough to be waiting for them into an unpleasant mess that would need a full HAZMAT team to clean up.

Anticlimactically however, as the doors opened it turned out there wasn't anyone stupid enough to be waiting for the bullets, rockets and armor-piercing grenades ready to be unleashed.

Heartbeats later, as the Spartans with a wave of status lights confirmed the corridor was clear of immediate threats, the eight figures flowed out into the corridor with a singular purpose. Moving quickly yet remaining almost silent despite their incredible bulk, they advanced swiftly. Eyes and other more esoteric systems checked into and behind every nook and cranny as they passed through the empty reception area at the end of the corridor, splitting without so much as a word at the T-intersection beyond, the two fire teams probing deeper into the base as they searched for anyone who wasn't supposed to be present.

With _very _specific orders of what to do if they found such people.

Back at the elevator, another group of towering figures filed calmly out of the elevator, advancing in the wake of the first squad towards the reception area. Their weapons were held ready but not in advance-to-contact mode, the two teams instead forming a protective barrier around six far less imposing people, who looked almost diminutive next to the titans in power armor.

Which wasn't to say that they were insignificant. If anything, those tiny figures were by far the most important people in this entire group, hence the concentration of an almost unprecedented number of Spartan II commandos to keep them alive.

But it was undeniable that some of the members of the second group were much â€| _louder _â€| than the Spartans.

"Well I have to say that was the _second _most exciting elevator ride I've ever taken in my life" Vala Mal Doran complained as she took in the rather featureless corridor. "And all for this? Its really a long way to fall to see the same fifty shades of grey I've been seeing for _weeks _on the _Odyssey-_"

"Vala" Cameron Mitchell sighed as the team came to a halt in the reception area, "not now please". He had long figured out that her often irreverent attitude was mostly the way she coped with high tension situations - and he couldn't help but admit his own heart was still racing from the near death escape.

But he really didn't want her making them look bad in front of the UNSC. Luckily she took the hint and closed her mouth for now.

"Alright Chief, we're as secure as we're going to get" Mitchell said, turning his attention to the tallest Spartan in the mix. "Mind explaining what the _hell _just happened?"

One of the Spartans -_not _the person he had been looking at- turned to face him. Ignoring the distant snicker from Vala, he corrected his orientation as he wondered idly why these 'Spartans' didn't paint names on their armor before deciding it was probably part of their mystique, much as their use of callsign numbers over surnames. All the Spartans looking almost identical to each other in the same armor, distinguishable only to themselves...

"Sir" the other seemed to almost come to attention at his question. "I suspect a rogue ONI officer, Colonel James Ackerson, has infiltrated this facility within the last six hours. An AI known to be associated with him was present in the base network and rigged the elevator system in an attempt to eliminate anyone who tried to enter the base it regarded as hostiles. We have isolated that AI, but it seems to have wiped all the base security logs and disabled the uplinks to the surface transmitters".

"So you're saying we're cut off from communications with the outside world?"

"Yes Sir" the other confirmed.

"Threat assessment?"

"Unclear - but presumed high" and Mitchell couldn't help but be impressed -or perhaps even slightly intimidated- by the almost glacial calmness the other presented, as if being dropped in an elevator to their deaths was just a typical Tuesday for he and his team. "Colonel Ackerson had access to considerable resources prior to a recent ...reshuffle... in the higher levels of the Office of Naval Intelligence and was flagged as status-unknown. He was also a highly decorated field agent in of himself, with decades of expertise in covert and special operations units. Although it is doubtful he is operating with more than a squad or platoon sized unit in direct support".

"So..." Mitchell considered trying to be delicate about the next question, but on reflection, decided that the Master Chief seemed to be a very straight shooter and it would just be best to get to the point, wanting to know exactly where they stood with a man who'd apparently just tried to kill them all. "What is his status now Chief, with regards to the UNSC?"

"The Colonel's is, on the evidence at-hand, guilty of illegally breaching a Grade-1 ONI facility as well as attempted murder of a team operating under the personal authority of FLEETCOM-Actual. Under NAVSPECWAR rules of engagement his immediate arrest or if he resists, termination, is now nominally a mission objective".

Although the others voice continued to remain perfectly calm, there was almost something like an edge to it that sent a chill down Mitchell's spine, as he stared into that perfectly reflective gold visor. For all the absolute stoic professionalism Mitchell had seen in this man since meeting him on board the _Odyssey_, Mitchell had the sudden feeling that this man was _not _happy with the events that

had just unfolded.

In fact, he got the distinct feeling that this man in a 'not happy' mood would probably be something witnessed from a very safe distance...

"Well I suppose that settles that. Alright then, what's the gameplan?"

"Sir" the other paused for a moment, before continuing looking down at him. "You are the ranking officer present".

Mitchell blinked at that. Surely he hadn't just heard what he thought he had heard?

"Chief â€|" he said carefully. "I'm not a member of the UNSC, I don't have any command authority over you _or _your team".

"Respectfully Sir" the other disagreed, "Admiral Hood gave me specific orders that in the event of an unexpected situation, I was to defer to your leadership and authority - outside of you making a gross hostile act against the UEG. Sir".

Mitchell blinked again, exchanging a brief look with Gunnery Sergeant Wu, one of the Marines of SG3 he had brought with him to reinforce his team on this mission. A five year combat vet of the SGC who had seen and killed everything from Replicators to Kull Warriors; very little made Wu even raise an eyebrow anymore.

_That _certainly had.

Such an order was, if the UNSC worked anything like the US Military, almost unbelievable. Placing a top-tier unit like these Spartans seemed to be under _his _command when they had barely known each other for a day? It seemed ludicrous.

Although on reflection, as he turned back to face the other, he realized this wasn't really about command per se so much as the Spartans accepting his input on the situation. The Spartans cooperation was probably going to be _exactly _proportional to their confidence in his leadership. After all, NCOs had been working around Officers they viewed as incompetent for centuries in his own universe -and he rather doubted that was any different in this one.

And Hood probably knew that better than anyone if he had given such orders in the first place.

Probably.

"Right. Give me a moment to brief my people Chief".

The other simply nodded and he turned to retraced the few steps back to his team where Daniel seemed to be trying to 'encourage' Vala to stop snarking off so much, the two of them putting their conversation on hold as he rejoined them. Getting stuck in the middle of internal power struggles had made a mess of more than one offworld mission for the SGC - and from the other side, the sheer _mess _the rogue NID had almost made of relations with their offworld allies in the early daysâ€|

Still, like it or not, they _were _involved here.

But he'd need to keep his eyes open.

_Wide _open.

"Alright. The word is we might have stumbled onto this universe's equivalent of a rogue NID opp with the UNSC's intelligence services" Cameron explained, getting quickly to the heart of the matter. "One of their top level intelligence people, some guy named Ackerson, seems to have gone rogue - or is working for a faction of the UNSC out of Admiral Hoods control. And it seems we might have just found him breaking in ahead of us today".

"So another Harry Maybourne or Frank Simons" Daniel summarized with a sour look on his face, clearly not altogether happy about the situation. "Or a full Trust scenario? A splinter group beholden to no-one with their own agenda?"

"Could be" Mitchell nodded in agreement. "So, here's-

"Is this even our concern?" Vala put in suddenly, frowning. "It sounds to me like this is a matter for the UNSC to deal with, internal politics and all that, not anything to do with us".

"Well speaking for myself, I tend to take people trying to kill me personally" Mitchell replied in a deadpan tone. "But it's a fair point. _Do _we have skin in this game?"

"Do we really have a choice?" Wu asked, although his eyes didn't leave the Spartan team calmly watching them back from just down the hall. "We have no contact with the _Odyssey _- and Colonel Carter said it was too risky to risk using the Asgard beaming system this close to that energy field anyway, so unless you trust the elevator without it being checked over...it's not like we have anywhere to go but forward"

Mitchell shuddered slightly at that. No he did _not _trust the elevator. Being trapped in a metal box plummeting at terminal velocity towards a rather terminal end (again) did _not _appeal - at least until a full maintenance team checked it. There would probably be an emergency stairwell to the surface _somewhere _â€| but that would be a _lot _of stairs given that they were several kilometers underground.

"We could just stay here" Daniel suggested after everyone took a second to dismiss that option. "If this guy _is_ down here, well, then he's trapped right? There _have _to be emergency access routes into this base like at the SGC; why not secure _them_, and send one of the Spartans to get word to Admiral Hood and General Landry of what happened. Have them call in an army to come and flush him out?"

Mitchell considered that - it was actually not a half bad idea on the face of it as opposed to rushing into an unknown situation. And it wasn't often that an SGC mission had an option of 'call in an army'.

But there was one small problem with such an approach.

"This base was evacuated when the Covenant came-a-knocking" he pointed out. "According to the Chief, everything of any critical value was already either moved off-site or destroyed in place. No â€¦ I don't think it's the _base _he's after. He's just using it as the front door like we are".

"Indeed" Teal'c joined the conversation with his typical directness. "We must assume Colonel Ackerson is searching for the same alien presence we are. If so, we must further assume his motives are not aligned with ours or those of our allies". Teal'c paused as if in thought for a moment before continuing. "There also remains the possibility of Covenant infiltration of these tunnels and in either case, further delay may prove inadvisable given our objective".

"Agreed" Mitchell nodded after a moment, wishing Carter was here to give him another option, feeling he was in way over his head here as things rapidly shifted and changed. General Landry had pretty much forbidden her from deploying to any combat zones at this time however - she was just too valuable to risk getting killed in a tunnel firefight if she was the only one who had a real chance of getting them home. "But Daniel makes a good point, we need to try and get the word out. Chief?" he raised his voice and turned around to face the eight Spartans. "Status of the recon teams?"

"No contact so far, they're finishing the sweeps of Scarlet level now and locking it down behind them as they go. They'll move onto Lavender level next to secure the access point to the old mining tunnels" the other replied after a moment.

"Alright" Mitchell called in a suddenly much more authoritative voice that had all the Spartans in earshot stiffen slightly on reflex, "then here's the game planâ€¦"

****15:20 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /
>USS Odyssey, Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System**

"There's another one" Marks called out.

Samantha Carter glanced up at the master display in the Asgard Core room, just in time to see a energy spike dissipate on the live readout.

"Time?" she asked as her gaze flickered over a number of other readouts on the main screen comparing the frequency, amplitude and duration of the surge to the previous one.

"Just over fifteen minutes since the last one" Marks noted as she fed the data into the Asgard core on the latest exotic radiation pulse, still not really sure what she was dealing with. Increasingly, Sam was convinced that whatever was down under CASTLE base was at least in some way responsible for their dramatic shift of universes and timeframes. If so, it made it critical that they get their hands on â€¦ whatever â€¦ it was. If they were _very _lucky, it would be some kind of alien inter-universal technology like a Quantum mirror they could simply turn on and use to get back home. Otherwiseâ€¦

Well, otherwise, everything would rest on her shoulders to find them a way home.

Again.

It had only really struck her when talking to Jay Felger during the 'Avenger' crisis _exactly _how she was perceived by the science and engineering sides of Stargate command. And after she (with her Father and Selmacs help, although everyone seemed to keep _forgetting _them) had managed to defeat the Replicators by blasting the entire Milky Way with the Dakara device through the Stargate network, the 'legend' around her had only seemed to grow.

And if she heard just _one _more person casually ask her about the time she had blown up a starâ€|

Partially because she had been mentally exhausted by the 'drop everything for this crisis of the week!' life at the SGC, she had taken command of R&D at Area-51 after the defeat of the Replicators and Goa'uld had heralded a new age for the Galaxy. Being able to simply sit down and focus on long term projects had been a joy - even if part of her admitted that she missed the rush of walking through the Gate to explore new planets across the Galaxy.

But more than anything, she had _needed _some time to decompress. There was only so many times you could have the weight of your Galaxy resting on your shoulders before your spine would snap and after eight years of non stop action and possible planetary destruction, she had been closer than she liked to think to that point. And she had taken advantage of the dramatic strategic shift with the collapse of the Goa'uld empire and destruction of the Replicators to take stock.

Of course, Cam had mercilessly worked to 'get the band back together' and eventually, in the face of the new Ori threat, she had returned to the front line at the SGC. Which had placed her on board the _Odyssey _when it had been flung into this alternate universe. She supposed that was a good thing though. If she hadn't been on board when the transit had happenedâ€|

Refocusing on her board as the console beeped that it was ready, she tapped a series of commands on the Norse looking runes and twisted a stone around, fine tuning a new filtering request for the core to process, chiding herself for getting distracted. The word that SG1 and their Spartan escort might be walking into the path of a rogue UNSC force had not â€| _pleased _â€| General Landry. Especially when attempts to raise the ground team had failed, with them out of both sensor _and_ communications contact.

With little alternative, Landry had accepted Hoods assertion that he was sending in a rapid response team to make contact and re-establish communications, but as soon as the communication was over, he had rapidly given her orders to try and establish contact with SG1. And if anything had a chance of breaking through the interference, it would be the the new communications and sensor systems mounted on the ship's hull linked into the Asgard core.

The core itself was truly remarkable and it was all she could do not to get distracted playing around with it. It was computer programming on a level beyond anything she could comprehend; all she had to do was tell it what she wanted, and â€| it just _did _it. Making scans of Spartan James's damaged armor yesterday had resulted in the core virtually all but reverse engineering it on the fly, down to the

molecular level. What would have normally taken her days with a fully equipped lab had been performed in seconds, letting her easily see, isolate and fabricate a repair for the damage in less than an hour.

It was both awe inspiring and intimidating in equal measure, thinking about the sheer disruption technology like this could cause to Earth. Like a 'cheat' book for thousands of years of technological advancement. And all the warnings from the Tolen, the Nox, the Tok'ra and even an Ancient or two, about what harm a surge in technology could do to a society not ready for it rolled around her mind as she worked. Of the difference between being able to use technology and understand it. She had read enough intelligence reports of the difficulties the Jaffa were having with their inherited Goa'uld technology, with the vast majority of their population all but clueless to the fundamental science and engineering behind it with their overloads dead. If Earth got all the answers for the next ten centuries of technological development on a silver platter...

It was definitely something that warranted a lot more discussion once they got back to Earth.

Right now however...

With a soft chime, the main display spat out its results and Carter pushed it up onto the main screen. Clearing, it switched to the the topographical map of the ONI base known as 'CASTLE'. The ghostly white sphere of the area of disruption to the ship's sensors was still there, enveloping a wide area underground, seemingly centered on the system's best estimate of the location of the energy signature a few kilometers away.

But now however there were six green dots pulsing inside the isometric passageways of CASTLE, slowly moving together down them.

"You did it!" Marks exclaimed as he stepped up.

"Not quite" she shook her head. "I wasn't able to detect life signs through the interference. But I was able to filter out enough of it to get a lock on the subspace signals from the subcutaneous transponders".

"Can we get a radio signal through?" he asked and Carter shook her head.

"No, not through that much interference". Silently, Carter wracked her brains trying to figure out something. The Asgard holographic systems were useless; whatever this energy signal was, it was completely disrupting the subspace tunneling used by it and the beaming system. Radio signals couldn't penetrate all the massive shielded armor layered over the base and apparently the UNSC also wasn't getting any response from the bases own SATCOM links which seemed to be completely shut down. What she needed was a way to get a subspace communications link established with â€|

Then she kicked herself for missing the blindingly obvious and, without saying anything, spun back to the other console in the room and keyed a line to the bridge.

****15:35 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

****Sigma section, CASTLE BASE****

****Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.****

Anton-044 descended down the elevator shaft. Meter by meter on a nanotube reinforced spool line.

As a highly trained special forces soldier, rappelling silently was not exactly a skill that was particularly noteworthy. But doing it while wearing a half ton of advanced alloys, flesh and fusion reactor _while_ upside down _and_ while being on the lookout for any possible sensors, tripwires, explosives or other surprises that might have been seeded through the shaft...was, for a Spartan, just another 'day at the office'.

This elevator shaft was the only access point between CASTLE bases sub-basement storage areas and the tunnels that had once been the titanium mine the base had been built over. Very few people knew what had been found in the tunnels - it had in fact been pure chance the contracted geologist had already been on retainer with ONI for an unrelated project when he had been called in by the mining company. And after reviewing the findings, he had quietly brought them to his ONI handlers. ONI had promptly paid him a handsome bonus for his initiative, then had a 'surprise safety inspection' find major issues with the mine resulting in it being shut down, then brought out by another ONI front company who mothballed it as economically unviable.

They had also paid off the few miners who had seen the odd formations, letting them know equally quietly that they could be _quite_ well off 'good citizens' if they kept their mouths shut and stuck to the cover story â€| or be assured their bodies would _never_ be found if they _couldn't_.

Unsurprisingly, the various miners had taken their rather generous severance payments and done their very best to forget what they had seen. The one exception who had tried to contact the media to sell the story had suffered a tragic airlock accident in low orbit several weeks later.

ONI had run 'KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN' for some time as they had poked at the fascinating crystal formations in the wall, under maximum security protocols. Clearly artificial and predating human presence, but after millions of credits spent had gotten exactly nowhere, it had been determined that they were not really of any interest and the project was terminated. If there had indeed been any alien presence on Reach, it was determined to be long gone now beyond traces like this.

Not one to waste such an ideal location, ONI had shrugged and then reworked and expanded the exhausted upper levels of the mine into the offices, laboratories and workshops that had become the almost impregnable CASTLE Base, while sealing off the lower mines and lava tunnels they had broken into. The single elevator shaft to the old mines was used only rarely by technicians assigned the rather dull duty of going 'downstairs' to check various utility systems as part of routine maintenance of the base, but otherwise it was mostly ignored as a vestigial part of the bases history, the truth of what

had been found down there hidden from all but a very few people.

Including James Ackerson.

Anton didn't know Colonel Ackerson personally - only by reputation. But it was that very reputation relayed from Doctor Halsey, Kurt and others which gave him pause and made him take his time as he systematically cleared the path forward for the rest of the team. By all accounts, this was a man who thought only of achieving the mission, with little to no care for the costs or collateral damage, an attitude he found personally distasteful. Spartans of course accepted non-combatant casualties were often necessary as part of their jobs â€| but as their field experience had increased, Anton and his brothers and sisters had come to repudiate tactics that resulted in unnecessary deaths or destruction in pursuit of the mission, no matter how convenient it might be to take 'shortcuts' over the bodies of innocent people.

They had been trained to be scalpels after all. Not warhammers.

Colonel Ackerson however, from what he had heard, probably wouldn't think twice about killing them all if he honestly felt it served his goals or the interests of the UEG - whatever the rest of the UEG or UNSC may think of that aside. And they had already had one elevator try to drop them to their deaths today, so...

Cortana had already confirmed that the elevator system here was clean of any tampering, but Anton knew the Colonel was far too shrewd to try and use the same trick twice, so he carefully swept the shaft, looking for any surprises - without touching anything or making a sound. He had seen nothing out of the ordinary and soon enough turned his attention to the elevator car on the bottom level, extending a micro-probe through a narrow gap in its roof with precision a surgical-bot would have envied. A tiny sliver of fibre optical cable with very expensive sensors on the end relaying data directly to his VISOR display â€| empty.

Methodically with the skill and patience that came from being perhaps the Spartans best scout, Anton pulled the hair-thin sliver around, systematically inspecting every part of the interior of the car â€| ah.

There it was.

Tucked away in the back corner of the lift, just behind one of the light strips where it would be hidden in shadow to normal eyes, a tiny mushroom shaped protrusion had been affixed to the roof. Painted a dull non reflective grey, it blended in well with the ceiling so as to be almost invisible, looking perfectly innocuous to the untrained eye.

But it wasn't. 'It' was an ONI issue field proximity sensor; model six one eight four niner. Essentially a high tech tripwire it was passive until unexpected vibrations triggered it, then it would activate a motion sensor to get a picture of local activity. And then, depending on its programing...

Well he wasn't going to wait and find out what this one had been

programed to do.

He marked the location using his helmets sensors before withdrawing the probe, shifting his position to hover over that part of the roof. Aligning a 'wand' like device he detached from his gauntlet, he took very careful aim and with a faint squeak of overloading electronics followed by a puff of smoke through gaps in the roof, the silent and highly focused EMP discharge destroyed the sensor. He took a quick glance at his ELINT readout ... good, it had fried fast enough that it had not been able to send an alarm signal.

With the sensor eliminated and no sign of anything else in the elevator car, he worked his way to the side of the shaft and dropped head first down the gap between the wall and car, following a hunch. If he had been the one to put the sensor 'tripwire' in play and yes, there was the Lotus Anti-Tank mine attached to the underside of the elevator.

It seemed Ackerson really didn't want any company following him and was willing to be somewhat more direct in this case.

Back tracking, he first took his time to sweep the other two sides of the elevator car, looking for but finding no other surprises. Then he returned to the mine and with long practiced skills he disarmed the device and detached it, collapsing the mine and securing it in an empty equipment holder at his waist.

You never knew when high explosives might come in handy after all.

"Shaft secure. Motion detector and command detonated Lotus mine, disarmed" he finally broke the silence he had been operating in on STEALTHCOM, his suit recording the message and then shooting it as a millisecond long UV laser transmission directly up the shaft.

Almost at once a double flash of blue lights came back and another seven Spartans who had been silently hanging on their own high-tension cables above him started to descend as he worked his way back up the shaft. Approaching the 'front' wall of the shaft, he pulled out a tiny drill, with its bit honed to a near monomolecular edge. The concrete that made up this wall of the shaft was neither structural or load bearing so it would only take him a minute to silently drill a tiny hole through the thin material for his sensor wand to get 'eyes' on the area immediately outside of the shaft...

And as he focused on his work, so too above him did the other seven Spartans under the direction of Grace-093.

**15:44 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
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Unknown Caverns underneath CASTLE BASE (Point Alpha)

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

Her name was Black Six.

Although she also went by the designation Jane-B300, in truth she had been Black-Six or just 'Six for so long that it had all but become

her name, her previous life a dull memory faded through drugs, indoctrination and hypnotherapy.

And she was a knife in the dark.

The brainchild of Vice Admiral Margaret Parangosky, Stiletto team had been created to serve _her _interests directly after ONI Section III was forced by HIGHCOM to go public with the SPARTAN II program. Their record since then spoke for itself of course, but the truth was that in going public ONI had lost their most powerful and effective Black-Operations tool.

And the Vice Admiral had _not _been happy about that fact.

So when Colonel Ackerson had proposed the Spartan III program, among the justifications had been the need to replace that lost capability. Spartan IIIs could not be expected to match the considerably more extensive training of their progenitors of course, but they were none the less a significant step up from the best 'normal' operators ONI had. And they had served well enough, but after the destruction of Alpha Company the decision had been made to quietly build up a separate 'non disposable' unit for the _exclusive_ use of the top level of ONI - and outside even the limited oversight the Spartan III program had.

From the 443 identified candidates for the Spartan III Bravo company, 25 had been quietly taken out before even arriving at Onyx, flagged officially to Kurt-Ambrose as 'unsuitable for training and not accepted'. In actual fact, these had arguably been the 'best' of the candidates, far more in line with the exacting requirements Doctor Halsey had put forward for the Spartan IIs than simply being genetically compatible kids 'lucky' enough to have survived a glassing. Twenty had survived the brutal training and indoctrination - and they had become ONI's 'knife in the dark' against their enemies. To be sure they lacked the MJOLNIR armor of the Spartan IIs, but Stiletto were none the less far more capable than the other 'disposable' Spartan IIIs - and morally indifferent to their mission orders, a very useful combination. Assassinations, snatch-ops, precision terrorism, false flag operations and the occasional hit against Covenant targets; Stiletto did it all without qualms or hesitation, unencumbered by the red tape, delays or even scant morality of ONIs more 'official' Black teams.

And right now â€| they were wasting their time sitting in a tunnel.

Watching a door.

'Six' sighed.

"What?" an annoyed voice asked from the darkness off to the side.

That voice belonged to 'Black Four' or Paul-B333, who was manning the SAW they had set up on top of the barricade so charmingly called 'Alpha Point', the only other Spartan with her at this advanced point. Assembled from heavy equipment crates and some odds and ends that had been left abandoned around the lift shaft terminus, they had blocked off one of the three exits from the assembly area around the lift shaft. This particular exit was directly opposite the lift and

was the most direct route to the tunnel that had broken into the lava tubes, inside of which was the alien base the Colonel had always suspected was there.

Too bad the ONI brass back then had been too stupid to listen to him; they could have probably saved humanity a lot of time and death if they had gotten their hands on the stuff inside that before the Covenant showed up. Instead, according to the transmission they had received from Araquel before he had been cut off suddenly, the idiots may be coming down to try and _stop _them?!

Some days she wondered whose side some of the UNSC were actually _on._

"Bored" she finally snorted in reply as she rested her chin on folded arms, her gaze not leaving the elevator doors. "Wish these damn idiots would come down here so we can deal with them already".

"They might not even know we're down here" Four pointed out. "They could be here for another reason, wouldn't be the first time some parts of ONI got sloppy and left something behind, had to come back to get it later. Or send in a torch team like us to burn a server farm some idiot forgot was offline and would be a grade one violation of the Cole Protocol".

"So why did Araquel go dark _just_ after saying company was coming?" was the obvious rebuttal to that possibility.

"He might not want to give his presence away if they're monitoring the base systems I guess. Or the arrogant prick might just be screwing with us. Doesn't matter, if they don't leave before we're ready to, we'll deal with them on the way out. _Just _saying that we might still be able to slip out without being detected is all".

"Well that sounds boring" Six muttered.

Four sighed again. "Yes, but probably smart. If we've really stumbled onto something that can win the war we don't have time to pussyfoot around while the brass and ONI fight over it - better just to take it, get out and win the war without anyone knowing we're here. Always better to ask forgiveness than permission".

"I guess" she conceded the logic of his analysis grudgingly. "Still don't _like _it though. I mean it was bad enough that the Boss made us stay covert while the Covenant were dropping in all over the place â€| but _this _is even worse. Frails, Hinge-Heads, _whatever_. Long as I get to kill _something_. I'm really getting twitchy for some combat, you know?"

"...You still taking your meds?" Four asked wryly.

'Six didn't dignify that with a response. All of Stiletto team had last year been 'upgraded' with the new drugs being rolled out for Gamma company of the Spartan IIIs. They had mutated their nervous system, giving them an incredible ability to shrug off heavy trauma or pain and keep fighting far beyond human norms, but required a steady regimen of drugs to counter off some â€| unpleasant aftereffects.

Like _increasing _aggression and _decreased _attention span.

Instead, she ran a practiced eye over the kill zone looking for anything unusual through enhanced optics in her SPC helmet. They had the entire area outside the elevator door dialed in with mines under the grating - in case something heavy came in- and their SAW zeroed in on the door to boot.

Plus of course the AT mine attached to the bottom of the lift, if absolutely needed.

And if the enemy got past all of that _and _them, then they would have to find their way through the maze of tunnels to the next defensive point, Bravo, where the rest of the squad was waiting. And speaking of...

"Point Alpha, fifteen-forty five, no contact, no movement. Comms still down with Araquel at this time. Authenticate Tango Sixteen. How copy?".

"_Copy all Alpha" _the voice of the leader of team two came back, who was holding at the main defensive checkpoint that marked the boundary between the manmade tunnels and natural lava tubes. The transmission was overlaid with some static caused by the signal degradation through the tunnels, despite the COM repeaters they had installed, but was clear enough _"Be advised we are still out of contact with Eagle and his teams. Maintain position and check-in schedule..."_

"_...next report is due in thirty minutes. Actual is expected to send a runner for check-in at that time, how copy?"_

"_Copy all, Team one Clear". _

And with that the line went silent.

John-117 nodded to himself as the transmission decrypted by Cortana went silent, checking his clock.

These people had checked in exactly on the fifteen minute mark, using a rolling authentication protocol, call signs instead of names and not wasted any time with useless conversation...

They had also, according to the tiny camera that James had poked out of his hole, mined the exit to the lift shaft and were holding in an excellent position back from the doors. One that gave them the advantage of fighting out of the darkness with floodlights in the eyes of anyone who came out of the lift shaft, turning the landing zone into a killzone for most any threat that came out of the lift uninvited.

It all added up to one inescapable conclusion. These were professionals.

He wasn't sure if that his job easier or harder though. If this did turn into a fight he had to assume he was up against competent opponents who had rigged many more surprises through the mining tunnels they would have to clear out systematically as they advanced. On the other hand, professionals were also more likely to recognize

their hopeless tactical position and surrender cleanly with a strong enough show of force - especially once they found out that FLEETCOM had sent in a Spartan Team.

Colonel Mitchell had also agreed that it wasn't worth losing the element of surprise to find out how they reacted - and had gained a measure of respect from the Chief for his easy assumption of command, despite the decidedly odd circumstances they found themselves in. It still felt decidedly uneasy operating under non UEG authority like this, especially when they had barely _met _these people â€| but he took some comfort in the fact that Colonel Mitchell clearly felt much the same way and was letting him operating all but autonomously to clear their path, not trying to micromanage or second guess him in front of his team.

>Yet at the same time, he didn't in any way sound uncertain or indecisive; simply letting his people do what they did without him looking over their shoulder and trusting in his leadership.<p>

And if they could work well enough together down here in â€| less than ideal circumstances, it probably bode well for the prospects of this new alliance that might just save mankind from the Covenant.

Pushing past his rare moment of introspection as his people finished up their work, the Chief keyed in SECURECOM.

"Final check, give me a go/no go for breach" he ordered and watched as the status lights in sequence winked a solid blue, the Chief noting them as he checked his own equipment one final time, then ran a quick eye over the wall in front of him â€| and foaming C-17 explosive that had long hardened into a thin, but carefully applied 'X' shaped pattern with a detonator set in the middle. Next to him Kelly shifted slightly in her harness as she finished loading a harpoon into her grenade launcher while Malcolm and William readied themselves above _them_ and shot Spartan 'ready to go' hand signals. Above _them _were Linda and Vincent, their two best sharpshooters, who had secured themselves perches as top cover, while Fred, Isaac and Grace were holding position directly on top of the elevator car itself at the base of the shaft.

Three more Spartans were hanging back guarding SG1. Thanks to Araquels sabotage to the base internal sensor and CCTV systems before he had sealed himself in the server room, they couldn't be entirely sure that there were no hostiles lurking, despite a thorough sweep and progressive lockdown as his people had secured their route. So he had left three Spartans to guard SG1 - and sent the remaining four under Vinh on a mission to report in. Cortana had revealed a maintenance shaft in parallel to the power conduit that linked CASTLE to the distant orbital generator complexes fusion reactors, used for supplementary power and emergency evacuation. Once there, they should meet up with the ODSs from the 'Autumn if they were still dirtside, perhaps even bringing back a company of Shock Troopers to truly sweep and secure the base.

Even for Spartans in power armour, it was a considerable distance to cover, but it was vital that Hood and Landry were informed what was going on quickly.

But neither he nor Colonel saw any reason to wait for them to get back either before taking action - and delays in letting the enemy

potentially reach the alien base and hold it hostage against them were unacceptable. So as the final status lights on his HUD flashed blue, it was now time for _him _to get to work.

"Cortana?"

"I've been ready since you asked Chief" the highly strung AI cheerfully commented. "COM system is online and pre-set to transmit as soon as we detonate, EW systems at 100%".

"Then as soon as I detonate, override their communications and transmit" he ordered, mentally shaking his head slightly at the AI's very non-military cheerfulness. He supposed he'd get used to her attitude â€| some day. "Assault teams" he continued over SECURECOM, "we're go in five seconds from my mark â€| _mark_".

Cortana helpfully put a digital timer on his HUD counting backwards as he set his feet and readied his MA5B, flicking the safety off with his thumb and gripping the secondary trigger for the grenade launcher. With his display on VISOR, a wireframe was being projected of the cavern beyond this thin wall as if he could see 'through' it and he aligned himself with the utmost care, bracing himself as the timer hit zero-

And with a thunder only partially muffled by his helmet, the wall in front of him disintegrated as Cortana triggered Graces explosive charges in sequence, the forty foot tall wall of the lift shaft fragmenting then being blasted clear out into the cavern in a sudden hail of loose rock as John aimed and fired his Grenade launcher along with Kelly, Malcom and William.

All four HV rockets screamed up to smash into cavern roof - and almost too fast for even a Spartan to follow, they found themselves _yanked _from their perches and into the air, swinging a tight arc through the dust, smoke and debris to land well beyond the mined region around the lift. Stones and rocks showered down over the area as he hit the ground and rolled into cover, a salvo of quick-smoke grenades launched by Freds team whistling past him to explode precisely on top of the opposing team's position. A cloud of dirty grey opaque smoke that clouded both sight and sensors blurred into place with a loud _crump,_ cutting off both sides from each other.

Elapsed time, six point two seconds and counting.

His external speakers activated as he set himself, a message he had recorded prior to the breach echoing loudly from the stone walls as he identified his team, his authority and ordered the intruders to drop their weapons and come out with their hands on top of their heads. Cortana was also broadcasting it on the radio frequencies she had determined they were using â€| but as the seconds past and he kept his rifle trained unerringly on the smoke filled gap from behind a half wrecked mining scoop â€| nothing happened.

"Cortana, status?" he asked as the message finished its broadcast.

"I've just finished recalibrating your motion tracker and I have movement â€" phase tracking is _away _from us - wait â€| confirmed. They _just_ made several attempts to trigger the explosives set

around the lift, but don't worry, I blocked it and used it to piggyback into the explosives and disarm them".

"Any response to my message?"

"You don't think trying to blow us all up is a response?" the AI asked in a somewhat amused tone. "But no, just an attempt to signal their friends I shut down - for now".

The Chief considered that. If their response was to try and detonate the mines before falling back towards _their _objective â€|

Well, as far as the Master Chief was concerned these people had been given a fair chance to make the right choice â€| and had chosen poorly.

He saw little reason to risk giving them another.

With the briefest hand signals, he and the other three Spartans moved up and out. A flicker of motion and a pair of grenades sailed over the barrier to detonate with terrific force as the crouched on the reverse side â€" but there were no secondary explosions, suggesting they had not left any surprises behind. Vaulting over the barrier the Spartans all but seemed to leap through the dirty cloud, their helmets VISOR modes immediately settling back down once in the clear â€| to show nothing.

Landing in a crouch, the Spartans weapons remained aimed unerringly down the fifty or so meters of the tunnel until it curved to the right, their eyes searching for targets or any 'stay behind' surprises â€" and again finding neither - just the faint thermal traces of what looked like two peoples footsteps. Clearly their opponents had used their limited munitions on the elevator shaft and landing - which offered a much better choke point and no risk of friendly fire accidents. And with the Spartans through the choke point, they had decided to fall back and regroup.

Smart tactics - rather than hold an untenable position, they were retreating in good order, conserving assets. Indeed, they had fallen back very quickly â€" almost _surprisingly_ quickly given the distance to cover and surprise factor...

It wasn't ideal, but they had their breach. And there wasn't much point maintaining radio silence now. "SG One Niner, Blue Leader".

"_Go Blue Leader" _the other came back instantly. No doubt having heard the racket of Grace's work had made the Colonel anxious for a report.

"Breach successful. Opposing forces attempted minefield detonation but fell back when that failed, in the general direction of the energy signature. Explosives have been disarmed and the immediate area is clear of hostile presence".

"_Roger that Chief" _the other paused for a moment, probably conferring with his officers before coming back strong. "_We're coming down now. You may pursue the enemy at your own discretion. My team and the fire team you left me will move up behind you, but we'll maintain a discreet distance. If you _can _take some of these people

prisoner, so much the better, but that's your call. We'll regroup when we hit the Lava tubes".__

"Understood" he responded simply, cutting the channel and again reflecting on the irony that an officer from another universe who had no experience or even knowledge about Spartans â€| was much better at giving orders to them than many of the UNSC officers he had served under in the past.

"Anton, Kelly, Linda, Will; with me" he switched back over to TEAMCOM. "Vincent, Malcom, Grace; secure those explosives then expedite to reform on us. Fred, assume command of team four and escort SG1 in our wake - keep them safe, I want a minimum bubble of five zero zero meters. Cortana, plot the best path to the objective. Move out".

In a flurry of motion, the Spartans were moving, the Chiefs team assembling into their standard tactical formation on the go, with him in the middle, Anton and Kelly on point and William and Linda in the rear as he reloaded his rifles grenade launcher, eschewing the selection of stun rounds for a standard high-explosive armor-piercing one.

Twice now, James Ackerson or the assets working for him had tried to kill his team, his charges and himself.

He was not planning to give them a third opportunity.

**15:50 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
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Unknown Forerunner Facility underneath CASTLE BASE

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

"I still can't figure out any kind of pattern from these readings. It's like-

"Quicksand" another tech put in.

"-eah, like quickland" a third agreed with a quick nod, a Sweet William cigar in the corner of his mouth sending a thin line of smoke into the air and mangling his words until he reached up to pull it out, blowing smoke at his console with a glare. "Like space itself is randomly mutating inside that zone" he waved at the blue crystal tiles that seemed to mark the hard boundary of the 'strangeness'.

"But it's almost impossible to visualize" Chalmers noted â€" and Ackerson tuned them out as the eggheads kept babbling on.

_More like a mirage than quicksand _James Ackerson thought as he stared at the distant pinprick of blue light that was the Crystal, half listening to the babble of the technicians behind him. What he had envisioned as a quick snatch-op had hit a roadblock he couldn't blow up, bypass or hack. The damn Monitor of that installation had not mentioned anything like this, it was almost as if fate had moved from teasing him to openly _mocking_ him. Like a man seeing water in the desert running towards it, only to never reach itâ€|

He shook his head once, violently clearing the thoughts from his mind. Feeling sorry for himself or angry at himself was a trap any officer could fall into if they were not careful and he chided himself for doing so as he refocused his attention, thinking as hard as he had been for the last half an hour as he stood here watching the eggheads 'ohh' and 'ahh' over the -admittedly' amazing technology rather than focus on how to defeat it.

There _had _to be some kind of way through this â€| this _maze_. The symbols on the floor were quite possibly a map of some kind, but Gods only knew how long it would take the figure out a path through, it wasn't as if any of his people were expect linguists or xeno-anthropologistsâ€|

No there _had _to be a way to see the path ahead â€| if he could just focus the damn tech team on that rather than drifting off into studying the â€"admittedly incredible- situation for its own sake.

Sighing, he turned to face the tech teams â€| and paused.

Staring at the tech who was half chewing on and half smoking a Sweet-Cuban cigar as he glared at his console, the smoke from the cigar slowly rising above him...

It was the feeling he had often learned to trust in the back of his head; that his subconscious mind had picked up something before his conscious mind and was trying to bring it to his attention â€|

Then it clicked.

"Can ... I help you Colonel?"

Ackerson blinked as he refocused his attention, noting that the tech was now slightly nervously looking up at him from his computer screen and Ackerson shook his head.

"You already did" Ackerson nodded towards the other, spinning to face the Spartan fireteams stoically waiting. "Petty Officer" he called to Kerry-B303, who lead this five member fire team, "how many smoke rounds does your team here have for the GL-16s?" he asked.

"Ten sir, per team" the other replied at once.

Ackerson nodded with a grin slowly forming on his face, stabbing an arm out towards the distant crystal.

"Fire two, as far as you can, into that area. Set for maximum density and smoke generation".

"Aye Sir" the Spartan obediently nodded, turning to gesture two of her colleagues forward, who promptly loaded their weapons and set the controls accordingly.

"Colonel ... what are you doing?" then came the -predictable- voice of Chalmers came from behind him.

"Smoking out the problem" he replied without turning to face her, instead nodding to the Spartans when they shot him a 'ready' signal. In perfect unison, they raised the MA5Bs and with a deep _thud_ the

two rocket assisted projectiles streaked out into the vast gulf from the underslung launchers, leaving a thick cloud of white smoke in their wake - as well as a sputtering objection from Chalmers at his actions...

But the protests faded, replaced by gasps of surprise from the Doctor and the other technicians as the dirty white smoke trail was suddenly pulled every which way. It was as if a dozen different winds were competing to snatch the smoke and take it with them upwards, the two grenades themselves arcing wildly off to the right, then up, then down to the floor as they spluttered out a half kilometer or so downrange, the smoke behind them still being ripped away into dozens of columns and clouds that whipped around the crystal in the center rising towards the ceiling. Looking closer, Ackerson would have sworn that the smoke was in fact seeming to 'jump' from point to point in the air, without ever crossing the intervening space...

"That's amazing" Chalmers breathed as she stepped up to face him. "It's like space is partially fragmented, moving in different reference points ... wait, what's it doing?"

Ackerson looked up again and saw that the threads of smoke now seemed to be converging, merging and twisting into a single almost hydra like smoke monster two hundred meters into the air near the roof ...

And then suddenly the smoke vanished - only to reappear almost instantly, billowing out like a tempest out from the plinth the crystal was on. And his heart leap as he saw it was being pushed out following a narrow winding course, but one that continually led outwards. Like a snake or winding river, leading from the plinth and curving along a continuous line towards the edge of the ring.

It was a path! A path through the distortions!

"Alright, let's go!" he barked. "Team one, Chalmers, with me-"

"Hold it" Chalmers objected and it was only with great effort that Ackerson didn't snap at the woman delaying him yet again when he was this close and had solved the problem while the scientists babbled on. "If that smoke is getting pushed out, we need something to distinctly mark our path so we can get back out again, in case visual records or inertial navigation get screwed up again - I don't think we can trust INS or even visual recognition NAV points when we go deep".

...On the other hand, eggheads did occasionally have their uses.

"We have probably close to five klicks of nanocable in the field kit" Spartan Yu-B275 suggested after a moment of thought from the side.

"Get it, double time!" Ackerson barked. "And bring every smoke grenade we have!" he ordered, moving into a jog to circle around the edge of the blue crystals to the entrance to the path where the smoke was being expelled, at once just drifting into an entirely normal looking cloud of dirty grey particles that hung in the air.

Of course, he had barely covered half of the distance to the entrance

when the Spartan caught back up to him and Chalmers. It was easy to forget how damn fast they were. So much so that he wondered if he should just tell them to 'sprint it' as they put it, and get in, get the Crystal and get back out again ... but some part of him balked at that idea.

He had waited so long for this moment ... he certainly wasn't going to be sitting watching from a distance as the Spartans did the work for him. Not this time!

The last of the smoke had been pushed out by the time they reached what he had marked as the nominal entrance point. As the Spartans rigged the cable dispenser, Chalmers knelt down at the edge where the 'path' had terminated and pulled what seemed to be a small ball out of her pocket. And then she rolled it gently over the edge of the floor ... where it rolled to a stop and stayed there.

Reaching in, she pulled it back out, then took a half dozen steps further around the perimeter of blue cut crystals to roll it in again ... and bizarrely, the ball accelerated, then turned left and slowed ... then backwards, then forwards again, then crossed back along its path in a completely different direction, moving almost like it was caught in an invisible sea washing up on an invisible beach...

"That's just _wrong_" Chalmers muttered with a disbelieving shake of her head as she reached in and -after a couple of attempts- managed to snag the ball and haul it back out, stumbling slightly before she moved back and again rolled the ball through the starting point of the path ... and again it simply rolled perfectly normally to a stop. "Well it looks like this 'path' is stable. At least for now".

"Very well" he smiled, turning to gesture to the Spartan next to him.

A second smoke grenade ripped through the air and once again, the spectacular -but rather disturbing- dance took place as the smoke -this time a bright orange rather than dirty grey- twirled, rolled and danced in the air until finally it recovered and crashed to the ground. Again the smoke gathered and rose high into the sky and again it suddenly exploded out from just next to the Crystal after vanishing, winding forward to his location.

As soon as it reached him, he was moving.

The five Spartans fell into line behind him as Chalmers stumbled after them in turn. He felt a fierce surge of exhilarations as he moved along the perhaps two meter wide clear zone. _Here _he didn't feel even a trace of the kind of odd disorientation he had felt earlier and he moved forward quickly, the smoke puffing up slightly as he ran over it, but quickly settling back down as he moved along, trying to make as much ground as possible before the smoke ran out. It twisted and turned, so by the time the smoke was past and he was forced to call a halt, he guessed they had only covered a fifth of the distance in absolute terms, but probably run almost half a kilometer.

Calling a halt (and mildly surprised that Chalmers had actually kept up with him) he double checked that the Spartans were laying their trail like a modern day hansel and gretel to mark their way home,

then prepared to order another grenade salvo when suddenly Kerry-B303s head snapped up.

"Sir! I've lost the rest of the team!"

"_What_?" Ackerson backed, whirling around and his eyes went wide as he looked back at where the team should be waiting outside of the region to see nothing.

>No Spartans, no Tech team just an empty cavern.
"Where the hell did they go? Spartan Yu, report!" he demanded, calling the team leader of his second team. He waited for a few seconds before gritting his teeth. "Any Spartan, any tech, respond!"

Again there was nothing and he turned to Chalmers.

"What the hell is going on Chalmers?"

"I'm not sure" the other stammered. "It's almost as if" he voice trailed off as she saw something. "Good God!"

Turning back around, Ackersons confusion increased as he spotted a fire team from Stiletto team moving into the chamber, down the entrance they had come through originally. _Why in the hell did they leave and go..._

Then his eyes went wide as he saw _himself_ walk in, followed by Chalmers and her techs and the rest of the Spartan team.

"...incredible" Chalmers breathed into the stunned silence. "Space isn't just fractured off this path, time is as well, it's like we can _see_ Slip-space reconciliation with the naked eye! This is this is unbelievable!"

"Did we just move backwards in time?" Ackerson asked in shock and no small amount of awe, confused and stunned as he watched himself take in the cavern - and clearly not react to their presence suggesting they didn't see him because he _hadn't_ _seen_ himself.

Had he?

"No" Chalmers slowly shook her head. "If I'm right, our inertial reference path is still constant, but everything else is in flux - this is just a reflection if you will of what was before, that chunk of time in this location drifting by".

He didn't have a clue what she just said ... but it sounded worryingly dangerous. He knew enough about slip-space technology to know _weird_ _things_ happened around things like UNSC slip-space cores that lost shielding, God knows what _this_ _thing_ would do...

"Can we proceed?"

"Hmm? Oh yes, of course" she nodded. "But" she added a moment later just before he was about to give the order for the next grenade to be fired, "make damn sure you stay on this path. Stepping off it could be unpleasant at this point".

"Understood" was all he trusted himself to say, forcing himself to

turn around and face the path. "Spartans, once more please".

Another grenade salvo was launched and as he waited for the smoke to once again gather and mark the path for them, James Ackerson let himself take a final look at the incredible sight of his team â€| and himself â€| setting up an hour ago, glad his helmet mission recorder was running in full HighDef Capture mode. This would surely something R&D would go crazy over after the war was ended.

And he was close. _So _close now to having the key to end it in his hands.

And as the path became clear again, he led the team forward at a jog.

**16:10 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
/**

Unknown Caverns underneath CASTLE BASE

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

It was only by chance and a quick shift of balance that Cameron Mitchell avoided losing his footing on a patch of rough ground as it leveled out from the steep descent.

Again.

The floor of these mining tunnels were neither smooth nor even, covered with loose shale in parts, and groves from heavy mining vehicles in others. Despite the fact that the night vision system was the very best the US military had, depth perception remained tricky as hell in the shades of green that was his world. Denied the subtle shadows and clues the human brain relied on with normal light, it was all too easy to misjudge a step until it was almost too late, especially as the passage dipped and then rose again like a crazy worms path, carved through the crust following the richest veins of titanium.

Still, even if their progress was slower than he would have _liked_, it didn't have to be fast. The _Chiefs_ team was far ahead of them now. Cameron was in fact slightly incredulous at the sheer ground that the other team was apparently covering. Any normal unit he would have called reckless for moving so fast, considering it impossible to properly check for any traps, ambushes or other surprises while moving so quickly â€| but his own Spartan escort assured him that their speed actually rated as 'highly conservative and cautious' by Spartan standards.

Still, he couldn't help but wonder that if the Spartans _were _moving this fast ... _why _hadn't they made contact with the enemy yet?

It was enough to make him keep a wary eye out on every side passage they passed, wondering if they were going to be flanked or cut off â€| but he knew it was more likely that the enemy were just retreating (read; running) as fast as they could to another prepared position. The sheer casual ease at which the Chiefs men had busted past what should have been an airtight killzone had done a great deal to convince him that these Spartans knew their business as well as any Special Forces operator his Earth could boast. And if so, running

as fast as you possibly could away from them to whatever backup you had before even thinking about trying to face them made perfect sense.

And if they were running, then they were not stopping to set up ambushes or leave behind surprises.

Probably.

To his approval, his own close escort remained utterly vigilant as they moved in their slow pursuit of the Chiefs team. He had watched with an approving eye as they swept every centimeter of their tunnel for surprises, carefully cleared corners and side passages and otherwise moved as if they expected half an army to be waiting for them around the next bend. Even the best US special forces teams may well have relaxed a little bit by now, what with the lead team having already swept this area ... but not these Spartans, who clearly took their orders to protect his team's utterly seriously.

Not even for a second did they break concentration or exchange even one casual word - and as a bonus, their icy silence and concentration seemed to impose the same across his teams, forcing Vala to keep her mouth shut for once. They almost reminded him of footage he had seen of Kull Warriors, having that same air of implacable action and deadly focus about them as they pressed onwards through the darkness and given all the insanity that had happened since they had set foot on Reach, he was quietly glad to have such capable professionals watching his back.

Presently, the tunnel ahead was coming onto a more level gradient and as it leveled out, he caught sight of the point team again. A side passage that had split off a half klick back rejoined the path here and one of the Spartans had broken off to sweep it before rejoining them here. As he had not heard any gunshots or gotten any alarmed radio signals, he guessed everything was clean - a thought confirmed a moment later.

"Secondary passage clear Colonel" a radio transmission crackled over his earpiece as he and the rest of the team came into sight down the tunnel. "No contact, no trace of enemy activity".

"Understood, carry on" he replied and without anything more than a double click down the channel in acknowledgement, the two Spartans were in motion again, stalking like silent hunting cats down the tunnel, their surprisingly cool running suits quickly starting to fade from sight as they moved on beyond the range of his goggles IR spotlight.

Flicking on his PDA (and making a note to talk to the techs about developing a screen setting more friendly to NVGs while also wishing the Odyssey had been carrying some of those Ancient life-signs detectors/sensors) he checked the map the Asgard sensors had generated, updating his position accordingly. As far as he could tell, they had covered about half the distance to where the miners had broken into the ancient lava tubes - which was about as good a progress he could have expected really. Shutting down the PDA, he then turned and gestured wordlessly to Teal'c as they reached the intersection themselves, causing the Jaffa to also nod and pull a small spray paint cannister. With a hiss of compressed fluids, he sprayed an 'X' onto the wall just before the intersection, making the

correct path back with a paint visible to the IR range of their goggles - as he had been doing at every intersection along the way.

Just in case they _did _have to retreat in a hurry, he'd rather not have to consult maps at every junction along the way to find the correct route back. 'Know your terrain' was one of the key lessons hammered into his head through the 61 day Ranger school course he, like any candidate SG team members not from frontline infantry, had been forced to attend (and pass) before taking a post at the SGC. And as effective a course it was, it had not exactly covered moving through an abandoned mine deep underground on an alien planet â€| but then, what the hell kind of training on Earth could really prepare _anyone _for life at Stargate Command?

Smiling briefly to himself at that thought, Cameron's smile vanished moments later as he realized Teal'c hadn't started moving again, and was in fact standing stock still, his head tilted slightly in the way he often did when he sensed something.

"Teal'c?" he asked quizzically as he too came to a halt, keeping half an eye on the passageway ahead as the rest of his team drifted to a halt around him.

"Something is moving nearby" the other said simply.

At that, the sound of weapons safeties being disengaged by SG1 and SG3 carried quite clearly through the tunnel.

"Where?" he asked as he put his PDA back into a vest pocket before reaching down to take a better two-handed grip on his G-36 and flicking off the safety with his thumb.

"I am uncertain" the other replied, slowly turning around with his head still cocked slightly, listening or sensing something only he could. "But it _is _moving closer".

Taking that for what it was worth, he turned quickly to the two other Spartans with his team. "Blue Seven?"

"Nothing on motion tracking Colonel" the Spartan commented, his visored face slowly panning around as if studying the local terrain, or probing beyond it with whatever technological marvels had been built into his helmet. "I hold no additional contacts".

"_Concur_" the second Spartan replied from behind them over the radio as he came up to join them, "_no contact_".

Reading body language of the Spartans was a tad difficult, but there was _just _enough of an inflection in their tones to suggest that they were far from convinced of Teal'c's claim. But equally were too professional to say so aloud.

But Cameron had learned first hand from a great many missions that Teal'c had something like a sixth sense for sensing when something was about to go down. And it had saved his life too many times for him to lightly dismiss the man's sense of intuition.

"Alright, spread out" he decided quickly. If he was wrong, he was wrong, but he wasn't going to take the risk of being caught unawares.

"Get some cover and let's see what happens" he ordered before glancing at the Spartans. "Advise the point team to hold their position for now".

"Sir" the Spartan nodded once. Clearly still not convinced of the threat, but none the less obeying, two Spartans quickly shifted positions, readying their weapons and crossing ahead to the intersection of the two passages where they could cover all three access points, Teal'c tagging along with them. He personally found a nice little protrusion in the wall that provided him good cover from up tunnel, Daniel joining him as the rest of his teams found what cover there was. He controlled his breathing as the expectation of imminent combat started to cause adrenaline to surge, fighting to keep calm despite the hammering of his heart...

Wait.

That was not his heart-

Snapping his head up and easing it around his cover, Mitchell was just in time to see a section of the left hand wall of the tunnel around the corner from his position suddenly start to shimmer in the night vision, growing brighter and brighter-

"Contact front!" he yelled, bringing his weapon up - and a moment later with a shockingly loud roar in the tight quarters that left his ears ringing, that side of the tunnel flashed white hot and disintegrated. He caught a glimpse of Teal'c and his Spartan friends ducking back around the corner of their tunnel, but then everything was washed out as the blast wave ripped down and flung him onto his back on the floor of the tunnel.

The impact stunned him for a moment, but he shook it off in moments as the adrenalin running through his body kicked in. Rolling prone, he brought his weapon into position, flicking on the laser attached to the rails on his rifle in the same motion, the bright IR aiming point showing up well in his goggles, although it simply vanished into the cloud of dust and smoke ahead of him.

Then the dust shifted as a dull thud more felt than heard then heard through his ringing ears washed over him. The cloud of dust seemed to shudder, then a second deeper crump rolled through it, pushing the dust off to the side to show a

It was a huge

Bipedal and bulky, with gigantic boots that thudded like a detuned bass drum as it stomped out of the hole in the wall. It was hunched over initially, but soon extended to its terrifying height as it cleared the breach. Massive slabs of thick metal of some kind like some kind of medieval plate armor covered it, with a huge shield on one arm, and a cannon that looked it belonged on an IFV on its other arm, glowing a brilliant hot green. Atop its massive torso, an angular head looked around curiously as long spines on its back quivered - before its gaze settled on him lying on the ground not twenty meters away. Behind it, another of the monsters could be seen stepping out as the first started to turn, bringing its massive cannon to bear towards him.

Suddenly the powerful German assault rifle in his hands felt

_ridiculously _inadequate.

"Ah _crap_".

Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 rarely got annoyed when an enemy _insisted _on running away from both he and his team as fast as they could.

But he was willing to make an exception for his team's current opponents.

He would have _much _prefered them to have tried to make a stand at some point so he could liquidate them cleanly - he had in fact kept his pursuit speed up in the hope of running them down. He dared not risk an all out pursuit, charging after the enemy with all his team's considerable ground speed however. Not because he feared walking into an ambush -if they tried, so much the better- but because he had to be sure that he was clearing the path of any more surprises. He would _not _underestimate James Ackerson - and if he missed a trap or other kind of surprise in his haste that hit the SG teams following him

But it was for naught, the enemy was staying ahead of them.

They were clearly not far behind, Anton had a clean lock on the fading thermal traces of their footprints and confirmed the top layer of disturbed ground was definitely caused by people they were only minutes behind. But they were clearly moving at what must be a near dead run without stopping, for a not inconsiderable distance.

_Why _they were running so quickly was his greatest concern. To be sure there was every possibility they were simply trying to stay ahead of his team. But based on their professionalism thus far, he very much doubted they were simply fleeing in a panic either. They might have an alternative exfiltration route out of these tunnels - and the possibility that they were trying to leave them behind, then cover their tracks by collapsing the tunnels with a nuke or fuel-air device

It was enough to keep him moving his team rapidly. Whatever their plans, they would be much more hard pressed to act on it if his team was snapping at their heels-

"Chief, wait" Cortana suddenly broke into his thoughts and almost without thinking (_almost) _he flashed a yellow status light, the rest of his team freezing into immobility and sinking into cover in half a second.

"Go ahead" he murmured back.

"I'm detecting scatter coming back down this tunnel from a motion tracker ... and it's _not _one of ours".

The Chief considered that for a moment. "Can you localize it?"

"I think so" analysing here" she concluded and a TACMAP opened on his display, projected as if it was a meter in front of him hovering in the air of the tunnel. Studying it, he saw that the approximate location of the signal was almost right on top of where this mining tunnel ended, at the point where it had broken by

accident into the lava tubes that ONI had found so interesting.

It wasn't good news.

He could see on the map that this was probably the best defensive ground in the tunnel system since the elevator shaft itself. It was a good seventy meters from the final turn, straight up a slightly inclined slope to the entrance, which would be easy to barricade and fortify. Motion tracking would mean they could detect them coming in plenty of time to prepare a warm welcome or worse, could be used to direct defensive weapons even though most screening agents and jamming. And with the motion trackers denying them tactical surprise...

He was perfectly confident his team could carry an attack through the position - he was somewhat less confident that he could do it _without _either expending an unacceptable amount of munitions that might risk a cave in, or risk taking casualties among his own team if the enemy were not as considerate.

He needed a third option.

"Can you do anything about the tracker sweeps?"

"Of course" the other confirmed, almost sounding insulted that he had to ask. "I can re-configure your suits motion tracker to send an interference pattern. As long as you don't move _too _fast, it will neutralize each sweep before any echo is returned. It'll look on their end that there is nothing here at all".

Which would let them hopefully sneak right up to the final corner without being detected. If then they could do that, get eyes on the enemy position, they might be able to -

"Blue Leader" a new voice suddenly cut into his feed and he quickly switched over.

"Go, Blue Three".

"I'm hearing automatic weapons fire - _behind _us" he said in a slightly grim voice and John felt a ball of lead sink into his stomach. Will was serving as the rear guard for this team and this far ahead in the tunnels they had no radio contact with the rest of his team. But if his armors enhanced sensors was hearing distant weapons fire _behind _them - it could only mean one thing.

"Kelly Anton, roadblock" he ordered over TEAMCOM, his voice not giving the slightest clue to his sudden dread as he spun around and gave a very rare order. "Everyone else; _sprint it"._

Kelly and Antons lights flashed blue as they shifted into defensive positions, ready to halt any breakout attempt by the enemy.

The remaining six Spartans exploded into motion.

The scene exploded into violence.

The sound of automatic weapons filled the passage as the Spartans with Teal'c opened fire, hammering the two Hunters with bullets. A heartbeat later they were joined by the members of Stargate Command,

the stone walls not absorbing but reflecting the noise until in moments it sounded like a hundred men with jackhammers were busy at work.

Mitchell didn't really notice though. And not simply because his ears were ringing from the explosion that had blasted into this tunnel. But mostly because his focus was (understandably in his mind) on the rather threatening _thing_ ten meters away bringing its giant weapon up. Knowing as the gunfire directed at it seemed to just harmlessly bounce off, that he was a dead man.

Then a pair of zat discharges slammed into it.

The alien energy blast hit its chest and cascaded out like lightning, washing across the armor and then around the gaps and into the creature itself. A horrid screaming, thundering noise came from the giant before it cut off with something that sounded almost like a groan â€| before it collapsed.

Seeming to lose all coherence, the enormous figure shattered onto the floor in moments with the armor plating crashing to the ground as coils of what he could best describe as _worms_ scattered loosely all over the cavern floor until all that remained was a significant mess.

Faster than he would have thought possible however, the second Hunter spun around in alarm roaring - and for its trouble a _second_ pair of Zat blasts from up the passage slammed into its back as Teal'c fired in turn copied Valas actions. Once again, as the lightning cascaded around and through it, the Hunter lost all coherence and collapsed into a pile of worms and armor, joining the first pile.

The wave of Covenant forces pressing up behind seemed to freeze in shock at the unexpected neutralization of the giant creatures, as if the universe itself had imposed a two second timeout for everyone to take in the impossible sight and Cameron took advantage of the moment to scramble back into cover.

Then the moment was broken by a loud roar from inside the hole and the fight was back on.

A hail of automatic weapons crossfire tore into the breach as a mixture of aliens came pouring out, charging and slipping over the pile of guts. Small like squat aliens he recognized as 'Grunts' yelping as they waved their weapons, a hail of purple projectiles _whizzing_ past him to shatter on the wall somewhere behind him almost making him flinch before he focused and put a burst through the alien who had fired the shots before it could try again. The two Spartans seemed to simply be spraying on full automatic, but after a few seconds Mitchell realized to his shock they were in fact firing precise three round bursts â€| but firing so fast that it more or less _was_ fully automatic fire. Their rifles barrels jerked back and forth in a blur, each burst unerringly killing one, their fire scathing through the enemy as effectively as if they had been wielding machine guns...

The withering defensive fire checked the Grunts initial charge, but more kept coming, seemingly indifferent to their dead as they clambered over the steadily growing pile of alien corpses, wildly returning fire with more pressing up, suicidally eager to join in on

the fun and Mitchell grimaced. His team was in a poor position, with only half of his team able to engage, limited cover and Teal'c and his Spartan friends cut off ahead of him at the other side of the breach, in the side tunnel.

On the other hand, they had a serviceable choke point and crossfire to work with.

Grenades were primed and thrown into the breach with warnings of 'Frag out!' as SG3's two Marines quickly worked their way into the engagement, the rolling thunder of their automatic shotguns now checking the Grunts momentum, the grenades and shotgun shells forming a storm of lead that barely stopped the next push. Teal'c, at the intersection further up the tunnel helped, hamming into the group with a P-90 in one hand while taking snapshots with his Zat in the other, in a way that would have been ludicrous for someone who had neither his half century of combat experience nor incredible strength that let him duel wield his weapons without so much as a hint of trouble. More help arrived at that point, as the two other Spartans who had been on point skidded into position next to the Jaffa master, their own weapons now entering the fray neatly in time to cover for their teammates as they paused to reload, throwing their firepower into the breach to hold back the charge.

Despite the vigorous defense however the enemy was undaunted, pushing forward apparently in complete indifference to their losses. And now new aliens joined them, a number of the vaguely bird like aliens he knew the UNSC called 'Jackals', their shields adding a whole new tactical dimension to the situation. Another series of Zat blasts from Teal'c snaked up the passage to hit the shields and Vala leaned around him to snap off a couple of her own shots - but the energy seemed to have no effect, the shimmering green barriers simply absorbing the blasts and inviting return fire back up and down the corridor as the Jackals set themselves.

Their accuracy was poor, wild snapshots towards the muzzle flashes deeper up and down the dark tunnels, wild bolts of plasma exploding on the walls vaguely around his team, sending painful fragments of hot rocks into his team. Their impact was minimal, but to his annoyance, every time a plasma blast streaked past his NVGs overloaded, the computer processing systems never having been designed to deal with high-energy plasma. And from the storm of profanity off to his side, he guessed the two Marines were having much the same problem.

Emptying the last of his magazine on full auto half blindly into the mass of enemies with a growl (he doubted he could have missed if he tried), he leaned back into cover, reaching up to yank off his goggles and toss them to the side, finding the tunnel more than well enough illuminated by the burning corpses and still glowing edges of the breach to not need to turn on his weapons taclight, slapping in another magazine before leaning back around the corner as Daniel finished spraying the contents of his magazine into the mass before ducking behind him.

He almost wished he _hadn't _been able to see so clearly in the dim light, coughing from the smoke and dust in the air.

More and more hostiles were pouring out into the tunnel, so much so they were actually slowing because they needed to climb over the

growing piles of their dead and slipping on the pile of worms and other 'remains' that were being churned into a gory paste under their feet. Or even trampling over each other - no matter how many the Spartans and Marines gunned down. Their fanaticism was incredible - and was then he realized they couldn't win this. They were holding the enemy for now, but the Covenant seemed to be content to throw more bodies at the problem than they had _bullets_. They had their Zats, but the Spartans didn't and given their lousy position...

It was time to pull back - while they still had the ammo for a fighting retreat.

He opened his mouth to issue the order, but was cut off as a new roar of rage came from the hole and then his eyes went wide as the piles of Grunts that had been increasingly doing a good job of blocking up the choice point seemed to _explode_, sending bodies flying everywhere. A new creature smaller than the monsters that had initially come through the tunnel but none the less _huge_ _thundered_ out through the Grunts, some hit so hard they bounced off the other side of the tunnel as it skidded to a halt, looking for targets with a hungry expression.

It looked almost like an ape, covered in fur and moving with all four limbs. With an answering roar, another half dozen vaulted over the barricade and through luck or design, they emerged as most of the humans facing it were frantically reloading their weapons again.

Cameron without thinking raised his rifle and put a dozen rounds into the thing centre mass, but to his shock, it barely staggered, seeming to shrug off the heavy rounds like he had hit it with marshmallows.

It _did_ _succeed_ in getting him noticed however and with a second terrifying roar it spun, much _much_ _faster_ than he thought it could have and seemed to almost vault forward towards his position, forcing him to slam back into cover as best he could as enormous arms seemed to reach for him-

-then was intercepted in mid air by another pair of Zat blasts and crashed to the ground, rolling to a halt just in front of him, dead with an almost comical look of surprise on its face.

No matter how much she might grate on him at times, there was no doubting that Vala was a crack shot.

That unfortunately left the others behind it. Most turned to charge up towards the Spartans, staggering but pushing forward furiously in the face of their defensive fire, but one in the rear wearing more elaborate armor seemed to think as fast as it moved, ripping the shield (and the arm attached to it) off a hapless Jackal in passing, interposing the energy barrier just in time to catch Zat blasts from Vala as it thundered towards his people with a roar, its other hand back swinging a giant _warhammer_ _of some kind-

Then its head exploded as a very heavy slug _cracked_ _up_ from behind him to intercept the things head, the impact sending the corpse crashing to the ground, rather comically on top of the other one.

"_Nobel; engage!"_ a new voice came over his radio and with those words a veritable storm of fire ripped down the mine passage, carving into the Grunts and Jackals pressing up after the apes without mercy. The _zipping _sound bullets screaming by just past his head encouraged him to keep his head down, adding his own fire to gun down two Grunts who had been leading a pack of such creatures, both holding a pair of glowing blue objects in their hands, which the two leaders dropped as they collapsed.

The rest of the Grunts stopped dead at that, looking almost stupidly down at the two dead creatures â€| then the blue orbs starting to glow brighter.

At which point they -and the Jackals next to them- started to scatter and push each other out of the way in a panic.

Taking the hint he ducked back around the curve.

"GRENADE!" he shouted as he threw himself fully into cover.

A heartbeat later, a pulse of intense heat washed over him with a flash of bright blue light, then a whole slew of secondary explosions that caused the ground to heave under him, a shower of loose stone crashing over him as for a heart stopping moment he wondered if the mine was caving in.

A few seconds later however he was confident the mine was intact - but the explosions seemed to have stalled the Covenant and he spared a second to check his team.

Looking down the tunnel, he saw a noted the new group of Spartans in an oddly mismatched set of armor (not his teams, but he would take _any_ help about now) advancing rapidly to contact, firing steadily as they went, unphased by the explosion and taking advantage to mop up what was left. His two Marines - no, _one _Marine, the other was being dragged by Daniel into better cover with a smoking vest- was adding his own bursts of heavy fire with his USAS-12 as a few more of the aliens pushed out through the breach, several more of the ape like creatures and now some of what he recognized as 'Elites', the flashes of their personal shields distinctive as they tried to push the flagging assault through - even as the Grunts fled back into the tunnel waving their hands in the air and dropping their weapons, several simply getting kicked out of the way by the newcomers.

The new Spartans however were unfazed as they skidded to a halt next to him, shifting out into positions with well practiced ease even as their shields flashed from hits. One of them, the tallest, was carrying and aiming something that looked an awful lot like a-

A thunderous screaming noise blasted through the tunnel, with a counterpoint tinkering of hundreds of cartridges being ejected over the ground then slammed into Mitchell, forcing him to squirm back into cover and slam his hands over his ears in reflex.

Yup, _that_ was a minigun.

After a time the roar cut off - probably because it had chewed through its entire supply of ammo- and the Spartan casually dropped the weapon, pulling a rifle from where it had been sitting on his back as he did so to start engaging with that. Shaking himself off

and trying to ignore his ringing ears, he hauled himself forward and leaned around the corner.

The charge of the enemy Elites had been shattered and even as he aimed his weapon the last of the enemy were cut down or fled back through the breach, screaming in a panic. Turning his head to check on Teal'c, he let out a sigh of relief as he noted the presence of a half a dozen more Spartans - his Spartans from their far more uniform armor- with their own weapons smoking as the massive crossfire ended the engagement decisively.

"Kat, clear the breach and eliminate all hostiles - Six, Five stay with me" one of the newcomers ordered, getting a nod from a second Spartan, who wordlessly gestured the team forward to the breach, where they set up and unleashed a volley of fire down into it (and got a number of screams from Grunts in return) before leaping over and pressing forward, the sound of their guns slowly fading as they pushed onwards, clearing out the immediate area. Other Spartans from the Chiefs team peeled off and to his mild distaste, started to carefully put bullets through the heads any of the corpses that still showed signs of life.

Executing enemy wounded really didn't sit well with him at all, but (at least according to what they had been told) the Covenant didn't take prisoners - and certainly didn't accept captivity on their side.

So he clenched his jaw for a moment and hauled himself to his feet, safing his weapon and studying the newcomers.

They weren't shooting or aiming weapons at each other, so he guessed these were not with the rogue group they were chasing.

"Colonel" the Master Chief's familiar voice came as he walked up to him, powerful floodlights in his armor activating and throwing the tunnel into sharp relief (he really wished it hadn't given the steaming mess and blood soaked walls). "Are you alright?"

"Thanks to your Spartans" he nodded to the four Spartans who had moved to rejoin the rest of their team, "and these Spartans, more or less" he added, gesturing to the newcomers before he remembered he had a man down. "Excuse me Chief".

Walking back (and having to watch his footing even more with the sheer number of spent shell casings and cartridges on the tunnel floor) he moved to where Daniel and Vala were working on Corporal Hayes and crouched down next to him. "You alive Marine?"

"Sir, Yes Sir!" the Marine grunted out. "I've had worse fucking sunburn".

"Marines, always lying around on the beach" he tried to keep his voice light, and not wince as he saw the burns on the man's arms. The man's body armor incorporating the new anti-energy weapon composite had clearly done its job, but some of the energy had clearly 'splashed' down the man's arm, roasting the skin underneath the sleeves Daniel was finishing cutting loose. "Hang in there Hayes, we'll get you back to the ship soon".

"Damnit I knew I packed it somewhere" Vala was rifling through her

field pack before finally finding what she was looking for. "Hah! Found it!" she announced, pulling out a golden risk with a ruby crystal on one side and a band on the other, slipping it onto her hand.

"Hang on, _where _did you get that thing?" Mitchell asked.

"It's mine" she shrugged.

He gave her a long steady look and eventually she rolled her eyes.

"It really is! I brought it with me from P8X-412 with the rest of my things" she explained, referring to the planet she had ruled as a Goa'uld -sort of- for a time. "The SGC already has three of them, General Landry didn't see any problem with me keeping this one when in the field - unless of course" she added with a raised eyebrow with a pointed look at the man under her, "you _don't _want me to use it?"

Oh she was good, putting him in an impossible position while giving him the illusion of a choice. Clearly despite how much she claimed to hate her Father, she had learned more than a few tricks from the conman.

Sighing he nodded and without any more fuss, Vala lowered the device and a low humming built up. Then a golden glow built up as a shadow fell over the group, several Spartans approaching him.

"One second guys" he held up a hand and as he watched, Vala shifted the healing device down and the pitch rose notably as she slowly moved it over the areas where the skin had blistered and burned. Before his eyes the skin seemed to waver and then reform under the golden light. How exactly this thing _worked_ he wasn't sure but as she slowly moved the device along down the Jarheads arm, the seared skin was steadily fading from the crisped red and black towards a healthy pink. "How long?"

"Shouldn't be more than a minute" she replied without looking up. "Plasma burns like this are very similar to staff weapons blasts. Healing devices are calibrated to be able to fix those up quickly, the Goa'uld wanted something they could use to show off to Jaffa in the field and boast about their Godhood, healing the mortally wounded and all that".

"Indeed" a deep voice came from behind him. Nodding silently to the Marine who was starting to relax as the device did its work, he stood and turned to face Teal'c.

"T, you in one piece?"

"I am fine Colonel Mitchell" the other nodded, still holding his P-90 in one hand like an oversized pistol and keeping a wary eye on the impressive pile of dead behind aliens behind him. "These Spartans are formidable warriors" he observed, glancing at the quartet he had fought alongside and a slight nod in return from their team leader.

"They are at that" Mitchell agreed, his mind recalling in vivid detail the Spartans dropping enemies as fast as they could pull the

trigger, turning back to face the Chief and newcomers who seemed to be closely observing Vala working with the Goa'uld healing device. "I don't think we've been introduced Spartansâ€¦" he prompted the newcomers, both of whom wore oddly miss-mash armor compared to the identical suits the Master Chief's men wore. Quickly, one of the two came to attention.

"Spartan Carter Sir" the first said, without saluting - as was proper in a combat zone even if he wasn't in a completely different military. "Leader of Spartan Fireteam Noble. Admiral Hood sent us to contact your team and warn you that we had evidence you may be heading into an ambush by rogue UEG elements".

"I think we figured that part out when Colonel Ackerson's AI tried to drop our elevator down the shaft and turned off the brakes" Mitchell replied with a slightly ironic smile.

"Kalmiya informed us of â€¦ that, Sir" the other nodded, sounding almost embarrassed at the events.

Or furious, it was really hard to tell with their faces covered by their helmets.

"Admiral Hood extends his deepest apologies for getting your team mixed up in this. Your Colonel Carter" he continued, reached down to his back and pulling out a small container of some kind, "also had this ...beamedâ€¦ to our Pelican en route when the _Odyssey_ was informed of the situation and that we were going on and asked us to give it to you when we saw you". The Spartan opened the container, presenting the contents to him.

Surprised, Mitchell pulled out â€¦ what looked like a polished white stone of some sorts, about the size of a wallet. Utterly featureless, with no buttons or controls it was â€¦ well, a_ stone._

"Okay, going to be honest" he admitted as he turned it over in his hands. "I have no clue what this is".

"'_It' is an Asgard subspace communications receiver Cam_" the very welcome voice of Samantha Carter came from no visible point on the stone, the Spartans exchanging a glance with each other at the sudden voice. "_I had the Asgard core pull this design from their archives; it can cut through to orbit from deep underground and should be able to punch through the signal interference from the alien presence. At least until you get much closer_".

"Hell yes now _that's_ what I'm talking about" smiled, holding the stone closer to his face, probably on instinct as he guessed that this thing used technology far more sophisticated than mere microphones to hear. "So, you missed all the fun down here Sam, we and the Spartans just finished a little tango with the Covenant".

"_The _Covenant _Colonel?" _a new voice broke in that caused the grin to quickly fall from his face as Sam's voice was replaced by the dry voice of General Hank Landry. "_Wait one, I'm going to bring Admiral Hood in on this conversation. Then you can explain to me exactly what the _hell _is going on down there"._

"Uh yes Sir" he recovered before glancing at the two Spartans who had

also seemed to stiffen to attention on reflex at the mention of their commander in chief.

And although he could not see their faces behind the orange visors, he would have bet a month's pay that they had the same 'oh crap' expressions on their faces that he did.

**16:25 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
/**

Unknown Forerunner Facility underneath CASTLE BASE

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

Finally.

Finally, it was here.

Standing less than ten meters from the crystal, James Ackerson revised his opinion of the things beauty.

It was far more beautiful than he had anticipated.

It was much smaller than he thought it would be, perhaps the size of a person's fist. Floating above a golden pedestal, it rotated slowly in the air. Patterns seemed to appear and fade by the millions every second as it slowly turned. A deep blue light seemed to emanate from its core, with edges and facets seeming to fold and reshape like the pieces of some kind of alien puzzle.

Alien in every sense of the word.

Priceless in every sense of the word.

And now, _his._

"The radiation surge definitely localizes right here" Chalmers confirmed as she walked around it, her portable sensor gear pointed right at it the whole time. They had discovered quite quickly that the 'path' as it were terminated into a slightly raised disk perhaps ten meters in diameter, centered on the plinth above which the crystal rotated.

And at least here, time seemed both normal and sane, despite being at point blank range to the cause of it.

"Still nothing harmful?"

"Not that I can _detect_" the other shook her head. "When the pulses are not occurring, it's all normal background levels".

Ackerson nodded, then hesitated for a second. The enormity of the moment pressing down on him for a second and he would be lying if he said he didn't feel a slight sense of nerves come over him.

Then he pushed past it and carefully reached out to take a hold of the crystal.

For a moment, it's light seemed to diminish. And for a heart stopping moment, it seemed that that glowing light was being absorbed into his

hands.

Then the light pulsed blue again and his helmet went crazy. Static washed over his HUD, his COM unit squealed and his motion tracker showed a thousand contacts around him before they vanished.

"Radiation spike!" Chalmers warned and he froze in place, fighting the instinctive urge to drop the crystal. "I'm seeing a lot of neutrinos â€| but it's not in the database, high order - wait â€| it's dropping â€| its gone" she blinked as the crystal in his hands. The bright blue glow indeed had dimmed somewhat, but it still sparkled.

"Anything now?" he asked, almost not daring to breath.

"No" Chalmers shook her head sounding bewildered. "Just normal background radiation again".

"_Colonel Ackerson" _a new voice crackled in over the radio and he looked up. His HUD had returned not just to normal, but now he noticed that the transponder markers for his _entire _team in this chamber were visible for the first time since they had been on the path through the distortions. And hitting his magnification, now he _could _see the others standing on the edge of the tiled area.

It seemed simply removing this Crystal from its plinth had shut down whatever effect it was having. _Excellent! _Then they were just about finished here.

"Ackerson, Go" he replied, noting that the communication was flagged on his private command channel and cutting out his external speakers accordingly.

"_Colonel, hostile Spartan IIs have breached the outer perimeter led by Sierra One One Seven - estimate at least a dozen, probably more. They claim to be operating under the authority of FLEETCOM Actual and have ordered us to stand down. No casualties on either side as yet, but the outer pickets have fallen back to point Bravo._
Orders?"

Pure shock settled over James Ackerson at that news, freezing him in place for a full second at the news.

Then the second passed and his shock was replaced with a growing anger.

Quickly, he turned to place the Forerunner crystal into the secure ONI sample case one of his Spartans was holding ready for him as his mind whirled, stunned by the unexpected complication and thinking furiously.

He had finally done it. Finally found what he had always known was down here for this long â€| and now, at the moment of his triumph and vindication, Halsey's _freaks _were coming forward led by her chief enforcer. Ready to seize his triumphs for their own!

Still for a moment, he _forced _himself to choke down the anger and consider his position. He had known that there was a good chance he would come into conflict with the wider UNSC of course. He had even

given his AI carte blanche to deal with any intruders trying to come after him while he was down here. But in the grey area that he and ONI operated in, such actions, even friendly losses, could be waved away or justified if he brought back something as valuable as he _was_ going to bring. After all, 'Ends justifies the means' was almost ONI's unofficial motto, allowing everything from the various Spartan Programs to 'asset seizures' on world's about to be glassed to be approved while their owners were left to die.

Nothing, after all, excused questionable actions more than success.

And if he near singlehandedly won the war for the UNSC, well â€| no matter what some of his former colleagues may have said about him, even Halsey wouldn't have a damn choice but to admit he had been right all along.

But this â€| this was something else. This was _directly_ _defying_ and committing an act of mutiny against no lesser person than Hood himself. Not even Parangosky with all her hard and soft power had _ever_ been bold enough to disobey a direct and lawful order from _him_.

Well at least not before she had been deposed. She probably regretted that now.

If he did this, if he ignored the order and carried on with his plan â€| then this would be a point of no return. It would be either victory or death, there was no middle ground to walk along.

And while he knew in that moment what choice _he_ _would_ make because he had made it a long time ago ... he wasn't alone. Oh he had no doubts that Stiletto Team would stay with him no matter what he asked them to do, their indoctrination had been _very_ _thorough_. His ship's crew too were loyal to Parangosky first and foremost, if not to the same level. But as long as he played his cards right and didn't back them into a corner, they would get him as far as he needed to go with them. Then they could report in and claim ignorance or whatever they wanted of their authority.

Chalmers and her team on the other hand â€|

Well, he'd deal with that soon enough, thankful that the Spartan had had the sense to update him on his command channel rather than the general channel. It would be â€| _unfortunate_ _if_ some of his team made the wrong choice.

"_Colonel Ackerson?" _the distant Spartan prodded after he didn't respond, shaking him out of it and focusing him back on the here and now.

"Right, understood. I'll keep this fire team with me. Spartan Yu, take your team and recall the rest of the unit at once. And be quick about it, I won't wait for you if the enemy breaches this position".

"Sir" the other acknowledged, clearly indifferent to the fact that he would be going up against other Spartans - let alone the very best there were. In the distance, he saw their transponder icons wink out as they vanished up that holographic passage that separated this room

from the long winding ramp to the tunnels above.

"Chalmers" he turned now to face the blissfully unaware scientist.
"Is the ground safe to cross now"

"I _think _removing the crystal has shut it down and eliminated the distortions" she said, reaching into a pocket and fishing out that little plastic ball she had carried around for whatever reason and with a surprisingly good arm, sent it arcing through the air to bounce away some distance, its trajectory looking satisfyingly normal. She shrugged. "Well it seems safe enough".

"Then let's move" he said, breaking into a jog past the raised area - and indeed, reality seemed to be back to normal as he moved through the tiled ground, Chalmers following along behind him. "Technicians, pack up everything _now, _we're leaving".

It was a little odd. He had just crossed the Rubicon; from this point forward there was _only _vindication, or death. And yet, he felt almost light.

Still, with NAVSPECWAR's most lethal operators sitting on their nominal escape route, he really _really _hoped that Forerunner Monitor hadn't been lying.

Reaching into his vests pocket, he pulled out a tiny white oblong it had given him. Perhaps the size and shape of pistol magazine, he pressed one of the two buttons on it as he had been instructed to do, but only once the crystal was secured. Almost at once, the device seemed to open up on invisible seams, the upper third of it separating into a half dozen floating sections with glowing red and orange lines, but nothing seeming to connect them to the body of the device as they slowly rotated in the air above it backwards and forwards in jerky motions before suddenly going still...

And to his _extreme _relief, moments later a golden shimmering appeared in the air a dozen meters away, solidifying into the glowing orb of Thoughtful Contemplation.

"Greetings Reclaimer!" it cheerfully said, twisting slightly to 'look' at the carry case he was clutching in one hand. "Ah, I see you have successfully recovered the focus crystal. Excellent, excellent! Now the work of the reclamation can begin!"

"Yes, yes it can" Ackerson smiled at it, as it moved to hover alongside him. In the far distance, he could see the techs quickly disconnection their equipment and shoving it into their crates and he mentally told them to move faster. He didn't want to leave his men behind unless he had no other choice, but he equally didn't want to leave behind all their irreplaceable ONI issue field gear if he could help it. "You said that once the crystal was secured, there would be another way out of here?"

He _really _hoped that it hadn't been lying about that.

"Correct Reclaimer" it agreed, its 'eye' shifting around slightly. "Within approximately twenty to thirty your minutes, local debt reconciliation should have been sufficiently completed to allow direct for return to your vessel from this location".

Ackerson smile only went broader.

There was no way even Halsey's freaks could possibly stop him now. By the time they arrived, he would be long gone.

**16:35 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
/**

Unknown Caverns underneath CASTLE BASE

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

The tactical situation was complex.

While complex tactical situations were something of Spartan programs *raison d'etre*, it didn't mean that the Master Chief *_liked_* it when he was forced to fight battles on multiple fronts at the same time. Both real and political.

The Covenant incursion had not been *_entirely_* unexpected. The possibility was, by in large, the reason Lord Hood had insisted on such a strong escort force for the team from the *_Odyssey_*. And based on the direction of the tunnel the Covenant had dug, it seemed Cortana's theory regarding the base camp Red Team had set on fire yesterday was correct; they had been looking for the same thing SG1 was. Noble Team were pushing down the tunnel even now, the last reports from Commander Carter had been that resistance was light, but persistent. Piles of the lowest ranking Grunts had been found killed by their own side with their methane tanks missing, suggesting their supplies had been running low and the few Covenant supply crates Nobel had found so far had been picked clean of anything useful.

And yet, they *_still_* attacked fearlessly, speaking to the folly of trying to take any prisoner.

After they had finished policing the mass of Covenant wounded (he could tell Colonel Mitchell disapproved, but was not going to make an issue of it) he had moved the entire group up the tunnel in a tight formation to rejoin Kelly and Anton, unwilling to split their firepower anymore, just in case they were hit again, as unlikely as it seemed. He had also 'borrowed' both Jorge-052 and Kyle-B312 from Noble to reinforce his team, confident that the remaining four Spartans in NOBLE would be more than adequate to deal with any stragglers as they swept the enemy breach - and with Hood confirming two companies of ODSTs were on their way, they would have plenty of backup soon enough.

A Sparten II and Reach native, Jorge had been detached to serve with NOBLE as an advisor while they got used to their new armor and the astonishing capabilities it offered them, making him the easy choice to reinforce his unit. He was also the Chiefs best Heavy Weapons specialist, able to place a 102mm rocket exactly enough to rival laser guided weapons while firing from the hip on the move. And that was a skill that he felt might come in very handy shortly.

Noble Six on the other hand was a Spartan III from Beta company. Something of a lone wolf among the Spartan IIIs, the Chief knew some of his recent 'black' field experience included dealing with rogue ONI cells, missions the navy had kept very hush hush. And given who their opponents were, that recent experience also might come in

somewhat handy today.

For now, he had given Nobel Six instructions to stick to Colonel Mitchell's team and act as their close in escort - and was pleased to see her taking the orders both seriously and competently. Frankly, he would have been much happier sending them back to CASTLE Base entirely, giving his people maximum freedom to engage the enemy without having to worry about having to cover them. But that was politically a non option. Things had sounded a bit tense over the subspace link between Landry and Hood when they had reported in - understandably so, given that a faction of the UEG had tried to kill them all at least twice.

Colonel Mitchell had spoken up firmly in defense of his team's loyalty and expressed confidence in their ability to protect them, insisting they proceed. And it wasn't as if he wasn't grateful for the others vote of confidence, but it none the less gratted that his team was now under suspicion thanks to the actions of Ackersons. He knew that trust was earned, not simply given - and that the crew of the Odyssey had precious little data to understand or trust anyone in this reality so far. So much so that when Lord Hood had suggested sending SG1 back to CASTLE for their safety while he flooded the mine with troops, General Landry had surprising deferred to the Colonels opinion that they should just push on as is.

The Chief was a soldier, but he had gotten a lifetime of education in the various factional games of ONI and the wider Navy. Clearly, the crew of the Odyssey were looking for information about the schism between the loyalist forces and the people trying to kill them, having precious little information to go on about what kind of situation they had gotten mixed up in.

Even more difficult, Lord Hood had just given him explicit orders that they were to try their best to take Ackerson alive. Again, a political necessity to show they were not trying to cover things up or hide things from their new allies, it added a whole new dimension in terms of just using excessive firepower to eliminate the threats. And while a lesser unit of the UNSC might have simply made the decision to ignore the directive, claiming it simply had not been possible under the tactical circumstances, the Master Chief would be damned if he ever chose to take such an easy way out!

No, he'd deal with his orders and his situation with the same utter professionalism he demanded of every person under his command.

It was a waste of his time and energy to concern himself with 'what if's' on the strategic level, instead focusing his attention on the more immediate tactical issue he was facing; Colonel Ackerson's 'roadblock'.

"It should be straightforward enough Chief" Jorge mused in his deep voice as he studied the picture on the datapad. Cortana had cleared up the images gathered by Anton - undetected - while they had been fighting off the Covenant, giving him enough data to try to formulate a plan of attack.

It didn't look terribly promising.

The tunnel ran for a good seventy straight meters slightly uphill from the last bend. At the end, the mine abruptly ended in a much

less refined passage of natural rock, clearly the point the miners had broken through to what they thought were rich ore veins but turned out to be the ancient lava tubes ONI had found so fascinating.

The barricade itself directly in front of the entrance was stacked with standard UNSC field crates. Rugged enough to resist small arms fire normally, when packed with earth they became a cheap and effective barricade and had been set up almost as a wall across the tunnel. This 'breastwork' provided excellent cover for a half dozen people to engage at the same time and the tunnel itself provided no real cover. A couple of light machine guns were placed on top by barely visible people, with what Cortana had identified as M74 30mm sentry guns hiding just behind the floodlights that illuminated the entire passage.

It was another annoyingly competent defense.

Even if those heavy weapons simply fired a standard suppressive pattern _blind _through a smokescreen, at this range...

"I shouldn't need to expose for more than two seconds" Jorge continued tapping the pad. "One rocket here, one here. They should wipe out both sentries and blow the barricade. Even if they have reserves, we'll be all over them by the time they get back on their feet".

"_The problem is the explosives themselves Spartan"_ Cortana cut in over the team channel. For various reasons, he was continuing to keep her presence hidden from SG1 - and ignoring her hints to engage SG1 in irrelevant conversations about their incredible technology. And in response Cortana was sulking./

She still did her job of course, with maximum efficiency, but at times she seemed as petulant as Doctor Halsey had been when denied information to do her job back in the past...

Shaking it off, he focused in on her analysis.

"_I calculate an even odds chance of cooking off secondaries if they've mined the barricade" _Cortana continued, her comments echoing his own concerns. _"If we're not careful, we'll bring the whole roof down on top of that part of the mine. Or, at the least, seal the entrance, which could take days to reopen if structural stability is lost"._

"Unacceptable" the Chief decided, wracking his brains as he analyzed the enemy position again. It couldn't be bypassed or flanked. If they tried a straight up attack, there was a good chance some of his people would get killed if they had rigged up any more mines or explosives to strip their shields before raining heavy fire down on them. His preferred method for dealing with such positions, dropping heavy ordnance precisely onto their position was also out of the question based on Cortana's analysis. To say nothing of the risk of killing the HVT they were after. They needed to neutralize the position, with a _minimum _footprint â€| there _had _to be something he hadn't seenâ€|

"Chief?" a voice broke into his thoughts suddenly and the Chief quickly pivoted to face Colonel Mitchell, now approaching with the

stoic 'Teal'c' in tow. "I see we have a bit of a roadblock in the way".

"Colonel" he acknowledged the other, tilting his head slightly as he saw Teal'c hand the Colonel a moderate sized sphere from his pack. Black, with a few golden lines curving over its surface.

It looked â€| alien.

"If you have any suggestions, I am open to them" he said without a hint of pride or hesitation. Chief Mendez had hammered into all the Spartans that a leader who refused to ask or accept advice or help when offered, was a leader who didn't _deserve _the title.

"I have one Master Chief" he said, holding up the sphere casually. "Question; are any of your people any good at softball?"

"In position" Kelly whispered several minutes later.

It wasn't of course, in any way _necessary _for Kelly to whisper. Her helmet was very well insulated, to the point that any sound she made would never be heard on the other side unless she was near shouting. And as her voice was being recorded and shot back behind her via a series of Laser relays to the rest of her team just behind the next bend in the tunnel, it _really _wasn't necessary to whisper.

But she did it anyway. Old habits died hard.

"_Proceed at your discretion" _the Chief replied a moment later.

Flashing her acknowledgement light, she turned slightly to check Linda, close behind. The Spartan shot her a subtle 'good to go' gesture, her rifle already cradled tight and ready.

Well, no point in wasting any time.

She looked down at the sphere that Colonel Mitchel had given her. With the greatest of care, she pressed the three odd buttons in the 'flat' part of the device in the exact sequence Teal'c had showed her, three small lights coming on as she did so. Then glancing at her mission timer as it advanced to 16:40:58 â€| 59 â€| _now_.

Pressing the last button, an odd low clucking/beeping noise, lights flashing and chasing each other inside the odd control panel, as she got a grip with her right hand on the mine wall. One second, two and-

With a mighty heave, Kelly pulled herself around the corner, sliding across the loose shale until she dug in her heels and halted in full view of the enemy. She ignored the sudden shrill alarm tone in her helmet as the opposing sentry guns fire control systems ranged on her and started to spin up - hurling the sphere with considerable force up the slope.

That done, she leapt forward, dodging the first of the 30mm shells as it streaked by, stepping forward in a rapid sequence calculated to evade the standard fire patterns of M74 cannons, even as the sphere reached the enemy position and was arrested by the small protrusion she had aimed it at. And as it impacted, a pulse of white energy

accompanied by a bizarre screaming/echoing sound washed over the enemy position...

...and as the light faded, she saw the vague silhouettes of the people at a barricade collapse to the ground like puppets with their strings cut.

The energy pulse however did nothing to stop the automated guns, forcing her to extend her next step into a dive as tracers streamed down the tunnel seeking to end her life, smashing rock from the tunnel walls as dozens of rounds ripped past to crater them, one glancing hit causing her shields to shimmer as she tucked into a roll -

-just as four loud _cracks _sounded in rapid succession. Placed precisely, Lindas four slugs smashed two a piece into the chainguns, smashing the main power couplings and causing the guns spinning barrels to grind to a halt impotently.

Seizing the opening with both hands, Kelly finished the roll and pressed back to her feet, shale flying from her feet as she sprinted up the tunnel in a blur, snatching her pistols from her thigh holsters as she reached the barricade and vaulted over it; assessing the tactical situation in an instant as she flew through the air.

Six hostiles had been manning the barricade, but were slumped over and not moving so she dismissed them from her calculations, leaving them to the rest of the Spartans coming up behind her to secure or eliminate. More pressing was inside the Lava tube beyond it, where four new targets were hurrying forward in response to the attack, coming to an abrupt halt as she suddenly appeared, flying through the air at them.

And both they and the disabled hostiles outside the tunnel had all been dressed in Special Purpose Combat armor.

There was only one group of soldiers who had access to that armor - and even as she flew through the air, she noted they were reacting _fast_, starting to spread out into a firing line as best they could in the narrow passage, their weapons coming up, all at a speed much greater than normal soldiers (which ruled out any possibility one of them could be James Ackerson).

Clearly, the warning that Commander Carter had relayed from Doctor Halsey to the Chief had been accurate.

_These _could only be Spartan IIIs.

The fact that Colonel Ackerson had access to an off-the-books Spartan unit was both astonishing and yet somehow unsurprising to Kelly, given her experience with ONI over the years. But any sense of camaraderie or empathy she may have felt towards these commandos was suppressed quite ruthlessly by the fact that she knew the Chief had relayed an unequivocal order from the very _highest _level of authority to stand down.

An order they had ignored.

Which made them _rogue _Spartans.

Such a threat was unprecedented - the kind of damage rogue Spartan commandos could do working for someone like James Ackerson?

It was _far _too great a threat to allow them leave these caverns alive.

The visors of the first two enemies shattered as the heavy M6D rounds punched through, Kelly faster on the trigger despite her pause to consider the situation than these Spartans could ever be. But even as their bodies were flung back from the impact, the two next targets behind them aligned and opened fire on full automatic, filling the narrow jagged passage with AP rounds.

Her armors energy shields flared into existence as the bullets sprayed over her, rounds ricocheting wildly into the walls - and from the subtle surprised jerks in their aim that caused shots to fly wide, she saw that they had not been told of _that _innovation in the new Mark V armor. Returning fire as she landed, Kelly emptied both her clips into the next target in line in a vicious assault as she sprinted forward, cutting her target down with a shredded chest. Her last enemy continued to engage, backing away while emptying their magazine until she slammed into them with a lowered shoulder, just as her shields edged towards the redline.

The impact of half a ton of MJOLNIR armor to the chest would have killed any normal person from blunt force trauma alone (and probably sent their corpse flying 20 meters). _This_ person however moved with the impact, crashing to the ground with a clawed hand to arrest their momentum in a spray of loose stone, discarding their empty rifle to yank a combat knife with the other hand as they tensed in a crouch. Seeing no other _immediate _threats, Kelly assumed a loose stance, returning her weapons to their holsters, deciding in that fraction of a second to give them a chance.

_One _chance.

"_Stand down _Spartan!" she demanded over her armors speakers - but she might as well have been talking to a Covenant Zealot for all the notice the other took as he (or she) leaped at her, fainting to the left before trying for a right cross at her face with their blade, a strike she casually evaded with a slight twist, sighing to herself.

With blinding speed -even for a Spartan- her fist lashed out, seizing the extended arm and spinning the Spartan around to slam them face first into the cave wall, their knife hand locked helplessly behind their back.

The other was barely stunned by the impact that again would have knocked out a normal person, at once trying to thrash their way loose. But with an iron grip on their arm pinned behind their back plus all the mass and augmented strength of her MJOLNIR armor, it was an utterly futile effort. The attempted backwards kicks against her shins were cute as well, even if they didn't have the slightest chance of breaching her quickly recharging shields or armor plating.

Then the others left hand reappeared â€| clutching several pins-

Again with incredible speed Kelly reacted, hauling the Spartan off the wall and spinning, heaving with all of her considerable strength to send the enemy Spartan flying through the air, continuing the spin as she turned her back and crouched to make her profile as small as possible-

The blast as the grenades detonated was impressive in the confined space. The Spartan was blown into pieces and Kelly's shields flared as shrapnel rained on her, but far too little to threaten them. Moments later, a clatter of footsteps sounded as Linda, then Fred and finally John stormed forward in response, their weapons up and seeking targets as the thunder of the explosion echoed through the mine.

"Clear!" she called out as they entered, taking a breath as she pulled her pistols and proceeded to reload them, the automatic gesture doing much to push past the mild shock at the other Spartans actions.

"SITREP" the Chief ordered, glancing briefly at the remains of the Spartan sprayed and over the floor as he and the rest of the team spread out, a second group of Spartans following moments later to reinforce their position.

"The shock grenade disabled the first fire team as planned" she confirmed, seeing on her motion tracker that the rest of the team seemed to be busy back there now, probably securing the prisoners. "The second fire team" she nodded at the bodies at the Chief's feet "moved up to engage. I eliminated the first three, then attempted to disable the fourth after ordering them to stand down". She paused for a moment. "The enemy triggered their entire grenade store in an attempted MAD scenario - I did not have time to counter".

A very subtle wave of body language passed through the Spartans at her report. All of _them _would of course be willing to do what was necessary to complete a mission - they had all learned that lesson the hard way when they had been forced to leave Sam behind the first time they had engaged the Covenant. But there was a big difference between that and being willing to throw your life away for minimal gain, especially when offered quarter as she had.

Kelly wondered if she would _ever _really get used to the Spartan IIIs. So much like them â€| and yet so _different_. Still, she supposed Noble team proved that at least _some _of them were able to be retrained upto Doctor Halsey's exacting standards and expectations. Probably.

"Understood" was all the Chief said before a click signified a COM channel was being opened. "Blue Five, report?"

"_We're stripping their armor now Blue Leader_" Grace promptly came back. "_We've also secured their equipment and disabled their weapons. Their vitals show as stable and, according to Colonel Mitchell, they should be out for at least thirty minutes..."_

The Chief turned slightly to face Fred who had been checking the other three Spartans Kelly had neutralized, the other Spartan giving a shake of his head as he stood that said all he needed to for _their _status. Unfortunate; the UNSC needed every soldier it could get

-especially Spartans- but they had chosen their side. Still, there was at least a chance their prisoners might be redeemed - once ONI had gotten through with them.

"...no tags, no identifying marks_" Grace concluded her report.

"Noble Six?" the Chief asked next, his meaning clear.

"_These are not any Spartan Threes I've ever seen Blue Leader" _the other said after a moment. "_Given their age, I'd guess they were recruited roughly around the same time as Bravo company_. _But they never came through the Onyx training grounds"._

"_None of their profiles match any files in any Spartan program I have on hand either Chief" _Cortana backed him up quickly.

"Very well" the Chief said after several seconds, keeping his thoughts to himself, even as Kelly wondered how far this went. Was this it or were there other non-loyal Spartan teams out there?

It was a very disturbing thought, to put it mildly.

"Blue Five, keep them physically and chemically restrained until we can move them topside for interrogation and detail two to keep them secure. Bring me their helmet mission recorder so Cortana can have a look. Everyone else" he added, looking around the group as he hefted his MA5B, "lets finish this fight".

****16:42 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

****USNC **_**Pillar of Autumn**_**

****Parking orbit, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.****

"I'll _kill _the son of a bitch with my own two hands. No, strike that, I'll use _one _hand".

"Dan."

"It wouldn't be fair otherwise. Hell I might even make it sporting. Give him a stick or something to wave around if it makes him feel better!"

"_Dan." _

"...Sorry Boss. I can get a little carried away sometimes".

Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood directed a level look at his deputy for a good few more seconds as he took in the furious man pacing back and forth, looking past the anger to note the stress lines and sheer fatigue in his bearing. The man had held Reach in the face of a massive Covenant attack for days, trying to make sense of a chaotic pattern and to his great credit, had snapped the shocked Navy and Army units out of it and vigorously pushing the enemy back offworld. Then, he had even managed to pull off the rare occurrence of pushing back the first wave of Covenant warships that had moved in, only for a second, _massive _wave to jump in to finish the job.

If not for the sudden intervention of the _Odyssey_, Reach would have fallen at that point - and Terrence could see that fact was still weighing heavily on the man, despite the near flawless defense he had run with what assets he had.

And his job hadn't finished with the horrific nuclear blast that had ripped the heart of the Covenants largest fleet ever seen in human history. For the last thirty hours Danforth Whitcomb had been working non-stop coordinating the military and civilian authorities to both wipe out the last scattered Covenant holdouts while organizing disaster management teams and logistics efforts across the globe. At the same time, he also remained in command of what was left of 2nd fleet, dealing with the post battle issues there. And even with the organizational power of the AIs at his disposal it was enough to stretch any man to breaking point, like trying to simultaneously conduct a half dozen orchestras playing different songs at the same time at a _very_ high tempo. And even a man full of as much energy as Danforth Whitcomb...

"Dan, _how_ much sleep have you had in the last thirty six hours?"

The other instantly waved his concerns off.

"I'm fine Sir" he insited. "Just a little peeved at Ackerson".

"We all are - but answer the question please?" Terrance frowned.

"Begging your pardon Admiral, he's had less than six hours of sleep in the last forty two" a new voice broke in, causing Terrance to glance down at one of the small holographic figures 'standing' on the Wardroom table; a knight in heavy plate armor who crossed his arms in casual insolence at the glare Whitcomb directed at his intervention into the conversation. "Your CNI is showing all the indicators of extreme fatigue-"

"When I want your opinion Arthur, I'll _ask_ for it" Whitcomb bit out before turning back, something that sounded suspiciously like 'damn snitch' coming from him as he did so. "Admiral, I-"

"You're relieved Admiral" Hood said. The other still _started_ to open his mouth to object, but with only a slight tilt of his head the others objective was stillborn, Terrace making it clear without saying a word that this was an _order_, _not_ a _request_ _as_ he reached out to tap a glyph on the wall of smart glass. "Bridge, wardroom".

"_Wardroom, bridge, Hikowa here Sir_" the duty officer came back in moments.

"Commander, I need a rack for Admiral Whitcomb for the next eight hours. He doesn't leave the room and no-one disturbs him without my direct order for anything short of a reactor breach".

"_We have a VIP room ready to go Sir_" the junior officer responded at once, clearly having anticipated the possibility of one of their guests staying. _Good officer that one_ Hood reflected, unsurprised that the 'Luna Schoolmaster' as Keyes was known had handpicked an exceptional command crew. And it would probably be hell trying to get

any of them away from him even with RED FLAG aborted. _"I'll have a Marine there to escort him to his room in sixty seconds"._

"Excellent" he approved. "I'll be sending the Admiral up presently. Hood out"

With a beep the channel closed.

"Dan, you're no good to me dead, get some sleep and come back with a fresh mind" he finished a little more gently, slightly ashamed at railroading the other into bed, but he knew that Whitcomb was simply the kind of man who would _kill _himself before leaving his post. Even if he knew it was the wrong call and that he _needed _his sleep to be able to do his job â€| the man was just genetically incapable of walking away by choice when he felt there was work to be done.

On the other hand, he was also a hell of an officer and when given an order, generally followed it. And so rather than fight the point, he simply saluted and left the wardroom without complaint - but not _quite_ able to hide the guilty relief he felt at the idea of getting some sleep from him as he left the room.

"Arthur, tell General Walter that he is in charge for the next eight hours, he can route anything to me that needs Naval attention" Hood told the AI, who slammed a fist in salute against his chest and then vanished, minimizing to project only the ships crest of the Trafalgar, a 'polite' way AIs in conferences with others made themselves scarce while still being available if called on.

That done, he turned to the other person in the room and sighed, suppressing the urge to rub his head, thankful that he was wearing a duty uniform for once rather than the Class-A dress his media minders insisted on him wearing most of the time.

"Can't say I disagree with Dan's sentiments regarding Ackerson Sir" Vice Admiral Stanforth put in from his side of the table a few seconds later. "Although personally I'd sooner just throw him out the airlock - if not for the perfectly good waste of air that would be".

Hood grunted an agreement as he sat back down next to the officer, glancing over the feeds rolling over the wall of the wardrooms smart glass. They probably should have returned to the _Trafalgar_, which being the command ship of the 2nd Fleet was fully equipped with flag command facilities. But as the 'Autumn seemed to be at the center of this storm, he was disinclined to walk away from here until this situation was resolved.

Luckily, the ship's wardroom had easily been converted into a perfectly functional war room simply by bringing in a couple of extra computer terminals, with the massive smart glass wall instantly converted to display feeds from both the Bridge and Ground Command room, with a half dozen holographic figures of various AIs across the fleet and planet projected onto the table itself

All of this effort dedicated to finding out what in the _hell _was going on downstairs.

Vice Admiral Stanforth, as the acting CIC of the Office of Naval

Intelligence, was busy directing the main effort against Ackerson. Which mostly amounted to a chain of screaming down the ranks until tens of thousands of people and dozens of AIs dirtside were dropping everything and frantically chasing up Doctor Halseys revelation that James Ackerson was present and working his own agenda. No-one knew exactly _why _he was here, although the working theory was that he was after whatever it was the Covenant had been so hot to get their varied appendages on was firming up as by far the most likely. Especially after his presence (or at least his people's presence) at CASTLE had been confirmed by SG1 and their Spartan escorts via the remarkable 'subspace' link.

Six squadrons of Longswords had been scrambled into in a patrol pattern over the region, covering the entire area to prevent any retreat by Ackerson - just in case he had some other way out of the base. Two companies of ODSs from the Autumns own complement who had been deployed at the Generator Complex to the South-West were even now lifting for CASTLE, with orders to fully sweep and secure the base as they threw resources at this situation...

But he couldn't help but feel that he was trying to bolt the gate shut _after _the horse had bolted, strategically speaking.

Because simply put, Landry was pissed.

Part of Hoods job involved putting himself in the shoes of other people and seeing things from their perspective. And from the perspective of the crew of the _Odyssey_, they had just walked into a little civil war or internal power struggle right on top of what might be the key to getting them back home again. If _he _had been in Landry's shoes, he'd be _damn _suspicious about the situation. Trying to make judgements on very limited information from a distance with people under his command in the line of fire...

Thankfully, Colonel Mitchell - and the Master Chief for that matter - had done wonders to settle things down before paranoia could take hold. The Colonel (probably with various codewords mixed into the communication) had made it clear that he trusted the Spartans and determined that it would be best to proceed onwards. Hood _had _had offered Landry the option of pulling his team out until he could flood the facility with troops, but Colonel Mitchell had quickly _insisted _on continuing, citing the possibility that Ackerson or even another Covenant team could reach the objective before they did if they didn't press on hard. And do God knows what with it.

His reinforcement of the assertion that Colonel Mitchell had command authority on the ground _had _seemed to calm things down a bit, the gesture hopefully read for what it was by Landry, as hopefully was the order to get Ackerson alive.

Still, what a _disaster _in the making this could be!

Hood was the most powerful person in the entirety of human controlled space (at least in _this _reality) but he had never felt so powerless before. He had made every reassurance he could to Landry, but frankly the future of this alliance was now down to SG1 and the Spartans. All _he _could do up here was to try and figure out what the hell Ackersons involvement was all about.

"Lets hold of on the spacings for now" Hood rejoined the conversation

with his acting head of the Office of Naval Intelligence. "We need to figure out what the hell Ackerson's endgame is. There's something of value down here, so why is he after it? And why does he want it so bad he's willing to go to the top of the UEGs most wanted list?"

"Maybe he hoped to present whatever was down there as his reset button?" Stanforth shrugged, abandoning his keyboard and leaning back in thought for a moment. "Try to get his past sins forgiven by bringing in something valuable enough to get us to give him a pat on the back and promotion? He's made a hell of a lot of enemies over the years and no longer has Maggy to protect him â€| perhaps he's looking for a new patron?"

Hood considered, then shook his head.

"No" he considered. "Not Ackerson. The man might be an arrogant ass with an ego the size of a supercarrier â€| but he's always been focused on the war against the Covenant, no matter what sacrifices he or mankind need to make to win it - and no matter what anyone else thought of him. No, he could care less about saving his reputation. Or even ONI politics. Ackerson wouldn't take this kind of risk of acting directly against UNSC authority unless he thought it served a higher purpose. Something big".

"Okay, let's take a step back" Stanforth frowned. "Let's assume that he and the Covenant are after the same thing we are - whatever the hell it is â€| you know, this could have been purely opportunistic on his part, rather than planned".

"Go on" Hood told him, his eyes unfocusing slightly in thought as he considered it.

"Well, if he was on Reach, for whatever reason and saw the pattern of Covenant attacks, he might have figured out they were looking for this â€| thing. But he knew that no-one else knew about it. So decided to get in and work on asset denial because he thought by the time he could convince anyone, they'd have it. Too valuable to let the Covenant get their hands on it, so he'd go in and blow it up".

"It's possible" Hood thought, tapping the desk before shaking his head. "But that wouldn't explain why he or his AI would go hostile against UNSC forces coming in behind him. Or why he launched the opp after the Covenant retreated â€| damnit, there is something else at play here we're just not seeing".

"Well once the Chief hauls him up here, we can ask him" Stanforth smirked at that, clearly enjoying the thought of Ackerson being brought before them on his knees. "Too bad we shut down Midnight, they had a nice cell with a view of a granite wall that would have been perfect for him".

Hood snorted in dark amusement at that. 'Midnight' had been one of the more horrifying things to come out of the shakeup of ONI. A 25th century gulag hidden inside an asteroid field, for the most valuable of ONI's prisoners. While it was certainly no secret that ONI had a number of detention facilities, generally just sections of military prisons under the military justice system. It wasn't even a big secret that they had a 'black' prison where they 'vanished' some of

the worst people to without a trace. But the sheer scope of said prison and number of people there not on any records had taken everyone aback. Midnight was frankly something out of the worst nightmares of mankind - and had almost made Hood regret his decision to not simply shoot all of Section III's command level officers and be done with it.

It had been a true black hole.

Once you went in, you _never _got out.

It had been an easy order, to shut down the entire facility and process the prisoners into the conventional military and civilian justice systems, the ripples of which were only just starting to be felt. He knew that decision would cause headaches as 'vanished' people reappeared and told their stories, but he stood by it none the less, wondering when the hell ONI had turned from an intelligence gathering and covert operations group into a secret police force answering to no-oneâ€|

Well, they sure as hell answered to him _now_.

And soon enough, so would James Ackerson.

All he could do was wait, and watch the planet slowly spin under him, trying not to give voice to the suspicion that this entire situation was spinning out of control.

**16:48 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
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Unknown Caverns underneath CASTLE BASE

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

The walls were fascinating.

The Master Chief didn't consider himself to have a particularly well developed artistic sense. Art was really not something he had had time for in his life.

Which wasn't to say that every Spartan II was the same; several of his Spartans had artistic talents that may have stunned those people who thought they were nothing but killing machines. Vincent for example was quite a big fan of drawing in charcoal, a hobby he had apparently picked up from Doctor Halsey. Before he had lost her in 2531, Daisy had had quite the talent for carving small wooden fixtures - although she _claimed _it was just practice to keep her knife handling skills fresh. And Kelly's continual changes of hairstyle and colour could make the most jaded soldier double a double take on any day of the week.

But _he_ had never had the time for appreciating such things. It was enough for him to know that he was ensuring that the rest of his team and mankind as a whole survived to do so.

But even _he _had to admit to himself that the crystal patterns in the wall were almost â€| captivating.

Reaching the final NAV point a minute ago, he had been surprised to

find that the crystal formations he had been expecting were glowing a soft white light, illuminating the tunnels more than enough that no night vision systems were needed. The patterns swirling through the rocky walls of the tunnels seemed almost to undulate and shift ever so slightly as he watched, teasing with hints of activity he could barely grasp - and didn't even know if he was simply imagining.

It was fascinating â€¦ and annoyingly distracting. _And _worrying. According to Cortana's records on KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN, the crystal formations had been utterly inert through the entire investigation. Now they were glowing brightly?

It might have been a result of the _Odyssey _being brought into this reality, something turning on â€¦ or it might have been the result of James Ackerson turning something on. Or the Covenant. Or any combination of the above.

Trying to ignore the patterns as he pressed forward, the Chief slowed as a crackle of sound came over his COM unit, resolving into a hard voice, covered in slowly fading static â€¦

It was a transmission. Coming in under the same frequency and encryption scheme that Cortana had marked as belonging to the enemy.

When his team had policed the enemy prisoners, Grace had handed off their mission recorder chips to him. They were encrypted of course, but even ONI grade field encryption was hardly more than a mild diversion for the AI riding around in the back of his head. Annoyingly, the mission recorders themselves had been disabled - on _every_ suit. Most probably anticipating this scenario; to deny intelligence to the UEG of what the hell Ackerson was up to.

It _did _however still have the teams encryption schemes, frequencies - and most critically, the transponder logs. They had confirmed that 20 Spartan IIIs were present in this force - plus Ackerson himself and at least a dozen or more support staff.

Armed with some hard data on the enemy's presence and capabilities, he was pressing ahead with a reinforced fire team. His gut was telling him that the enemy couldn't be so vainglorious or tactically inept that they would fight to the death with no possible escape vector. They _had _to know the odds of punching through his team - and any other units they should assume were being deployed- were next to zero. And while Ackerson had always been in his limited exposure to him quite ruthless, he had certainly not been _stupid _or suicidal.

No, this man clearly thought he had a way out of here. Be it a hostage scenario by threatening to destroy whatever it was SG1 needed, or simply having another exit strategy being kept close to his chest; the Chief _knew _he had a way out.

Accordingly, the best bet was to push hard to get to him before he could use it.

He was leading fast skirmish team of himself, Kelly, Linda and Anton from Blue Team along with Jorge and Kyle from Noble team in advance of the enemy. It gave him a highly flexible unit with enough firepower and experience to deal with anything up to and including

the entire remaining enemy force, but didn't have to be slowed down protecting SG1. Fred remained in command of the bulk of the Spartans (in an unsaid sign of his approval of his leadership of the Spartans when he wasn't around) who were following as quickly as SG1 could move ... but they were well past caution now, following the tracks of light utility vehicles and footsteps Anton confirmed were only hours old.

"_...ome in team ..wo, te...three...do yo...copy, over?_"

"Cortana" he said quickly as he waved the team forward, eying the DF indicator as Cortana processed the signal and determined a heading, gesturing the team forward as he saw it seemed to generally align with their current direction. "Analysis?"

"The underlying metadata shows a direct broadcast, it's _not_ bouncing a relay this time, but the tunnel is still interfering somehow" she answered after a moment. "Phase shift also suggests its stationary. Nothing on motion trackers. If definitely from our friends though".

"_repea...team one and tw...do you copy, over?_"

The transmission came again, now coming through somewhat stronger, slightly more urgent in tone.

"_If they're not moving, they may be at another fortified position_" Linda pointed out over SECURECOM. "_We probably can't afford to go in soft on this one. We need to hit hard and punch through them"._

"_Could be a risk. These Spartans may not have MJOLNIR but they're just as fast as we are - and decently trained" _Kelly warned.

Having been the only person to personally engage them so far, it was a warning that the Chief gave considerable weight.

"_Blue Leader" _another voice interjected, the Chief taking a second to realize that this was from Noble Six, who was pacing him. "_I have a suggestion"._

"Go ahead" he asked, curious to see what the Spartan had to suggest.

"_Cortana" _the other asked the AI, _"can you scrub my voice? Record a message and transmit it back to the enemy, but make it barely audible? Scramble it a bit to drop a word or two -and throw in some battle effects while your at it? And overlay it with the transponder data for one of _their _Spartans?"_

"Of course" the AI confirmed, managing to _somehow _sound almost insulted at the idea that she needed to be _asked _if she could perform such a task â€| and only using two words to do it.

The Chief mentally wondered if he'd _ever _quite get used to having the spirited AI living in his suit with him.

"_Then why don't we send _them _a message? See if we can pull them out to come to rescue their other teams_ _and eliminate them in transit?"_

The Chief considered the others suggestion, noting and ignoring the relatively cold blooded nature of the suggestion in favour of its combat utility. It was certainly â€¦ creative. And it was preferable to meet the enemy in the field rather than assaulting a prepared position.

"_Not a bad idea Kid_" Kelly put in, the Chief frowning slightly at her somewhat casual chatter. She had _never _been entirely comfortable around the Spartan IIIs, even the ones Doctor Halsey had handpicked for the first fire teams like NOBLE, but getting that casual in the field was _very _unlike her.

It was possible having to kill those other Spartans like she had _had _affected her more than she realized. He'd keep an eye on her. He didn't expect it to negatively impact her combat performance, but he couldn't help but sympathise. Traitors these Spartans might be, fanatically disloyal they might be â€¦ but eliminating them still felt disturbingly close to friendly fire.

But he held absolutely no doubts _any _of his Spartans would hesitate even for a moment in doing their duty.

"_But if they pass on the message, we'll lose any surprise we may still have about our proximity to their position"_ Kelly added a moment later.

"We'd lose that anyway if we engaged them at this point" the Chief decided, turning his head slightly to nod at the Spartan III.

The other paused for a second, then his SECURECOM activated. "Cortana; record and modify as instructed" he ordered, then quickly gave a curt, not quite on the edge of panic request for immediate assistance, his entire voice and tone changing to be oddly â€¦ bland. Deliberately hard to clearly identify, yet filled with curt tension on the edge of panic.

There was a half second pause as Cortana did her work, then the message was replayed. Now impressively filled with static, his voice was distorted and the words almost but not _quite_ inaudible over the roaring of assault rifles and explosions.

It certainly _sounded _convincing enough...

"Good, send it" he ordered Cortana.

"Encrypting. Burying the metadata and verification signature â€¦ message is away Chief" she acknowledged - and now they waited to see if the bait they had put out would be taken.

They didn't wait for long.

"_Team two, we're moving to your position! Are you able to fall back? We've been ordered by Dragon to pull back to his position for extraction?"_

"Cortana, send a static burst on that frequency" he ordered as he waved the team forward.

"Done" she confirmed, blasting them with a static pulse.

"_Team two, say again?"_

"Send no response, we'll-"

"Chief, Triangulation shows the enemy signal is only four hundred meters away, and mobile, moving in this direction quickly" Cortana broke in over the top of him urgently.

The Chief at once took in the local terrain. Unlike the mines, these illuminated lava tubes were all sizes and shapes. Just ahead was _ideal _ambush terrain, an oval shaped bulge in the tube that would let them flank the tunnel on both sides...

"Set up here" he ordered quickly dropping a NAV point and the team scattered into position quickly, three people to each side. "Everyone go passive".

Soon enough, the sound of engines came thundering up towards them, the Chief identifying them as M274 ATVs. And a moment later, transponder data from _their _suits was overlaid as Cortana intercepted their signals, showing five Spartans and no Colonel Ackerson approaching rapidly.

There was probably at least ten seconds until they hit the kill zone and his team knew exactly what to do, in the perfect position for a parallel ambush. The enemies inertia would carry them right into a killing field crossfire, just far enough ahead that his team wouldn't hit each other, but close enough that they would be torn apart by the concentration of firepower.

Because he was _not _the robotic killing machine that some people in the UNSC may have thought he was, he spent eight of those seconds reflecting over the fact that he had just lured out fellow soldiers by tricking them that their teammates were in mortal danger, appealing to their sense of honor and duty to those sharing the foxholes with them, successfully pulling them out to their deaths.

He had killed plenty of humans before. Traitors too. But today, for the first time in the history of the Spartan programs, Spartans were killing other Spartans.

Then, because he _was _the robotic killing machine that the UNSC had trained to be, he smoothly pushed aside his personal distaste for the task, raised his weapon and took careful aim, a distant part of his brain recalling a phrase DeJa had taught he and _his _family so many years ago.

"With it, or on it" he whispered to himself, triggering the grenade launcher as the enemy thundered into the trap.

Cortana, for once, stayed mercifully silent.

**16:55 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar)
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Unknown Forerunner Facility underneath CASTLE BASE

Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

"Where the hell are they" Ackerson muttered as he paced, watching the last of the Science team finish moving their gear into place, packed up and ready to go.

Watching him as he paced, Kerry-B303 couldn't help but agree. Yu's team had gone out over half an hour ago. They should have been back by now. If they weren't, then it probably meant they weren't coming. It would be best to write them off and move on before _this _position was compromised-

"Spartan 303?"

"Sir" she at once shot up to attention as Colonel Ackerson turned to look at her.

"Go through the tunnel and try to establish radio contact" he gestured impatiently at the nearby tunnel. "Find out what's taking so long. If you can't make contact in thirty seconds, come back".

"Yes Sir" she said, sighing mentally.

Well, he was the boss after all.

Moving quickly, she headed for the tunnel. The light of the massive cavern faded away quickly to be replaced with the cute holographic 'story' - in reverse this time before it faded away into a pitch black environment. On a sudden impulse, she reached up and pulled her helmet off, blinking slightly at the sudden lack of light, trying to focus and see if she could see _anything _in the darkness with her naked eyes â€| nope, nothing.

Pretty incredible technology really.

Soon enough, light suddenly started to return and she started to raise her helmet-

Then froze.

Directly in front of her, in the exit to this tunnel and walking towards her, was a Spartan II in MJOLNIR armor. Their MA5B rifle was up and pointed _directly _at her face - and while their presence _here_ certainly answered the question of what had happened to the other Spartans of Stiletto team - it was cold comfort knowing that she was certainly about to join them-

"Kerry?"

Confusion, pain, fear; a whole _spike _of emotions seared into her brain at that astonished word from the other, staggering her. Maddeningly familiar, yet fogged and insubstantial, a surge of memories snatched away even as they tried to push up from her subconscious feeling her mind being _ripped _in two.

The brutal ONI conditioning that had helped to turn her into a soulless killing machine was being assaulted by her forgotten memories, a whirlwind of confusion and _pain _arching up into her mind and through her very being, _forcing _her to react in another very conditioned way; attack the source of the pain.

In a blur of motion she flung the helmet in her hands forward, the heavy headpiece crashing into the others rifle and knocking it off target, providing an ample window to spin around and run faster than she had ever run, back into the darkness, the throbbing of her head driving her on. Operating on pure instinct, training, without conscious thought, nothing but a Spartans fight/flight reflexes.

'Kerry-B303' had been born in a refugee camp on Sigma Octanus IV six years ago. Separated from her twin brother during the chaotic evacuation of New Constantinople in 2537, she had found herself entirely alone after being shipped off the arriving transport to processing. In shock and almost indifferent to her continuing survival, she had existed for months. Her world reduced to a cot in an old hall, converted to house the lost and orphaned refugees. Refugees who had no-one to care for them from the outer colonies.

She had cried herself to sleep every night, tried to ask every adult she saw for help, to find her brother or her parents, only to be pushed aside with varying degrees of indifference. She didn't understand that these poorly resourced and overstretched people were doing the very best they could and that she was just one of millions of refugees. She didn't understand, really understand that her family and everyone she knew were dead - at least not at first.

But slowly, she had come to understand that this was her reality now.

It was a rough place, the refugee centre. One day, she had broken another kids arm when he tried to steal her blanket. The next week, she had been quietly whisked away to a room where a man in a uniform told her and a number of other children, some from her centre some from others, that they could either go back to the refugee camp, or come with the Government men and start a new life to fight back against all the bad people in the universe causing them so much pain.

Everyone had walked onto that shuttle. And never looked back.

From that day forward her old life had ended as she had put it all into the past. She had taken up the chance to strike back against everything that had cost her everything she had, becoming what others may call an amoral killing machine, but none the less becoming an exceptional amoral killing machine. Admiral Parangosky had personally congratulated her on some of her successful missions, saying that she had the makings of an exceptional ONI officer about her.

Kerry's past had become a distant memory, only the raw feelings of helplessness and loss remained; twisted unknown to her by ONI indoctrination experts as the lever to parlay that into a fanatical subconscious loyalty to the people who had given her the power to rise above it.

Now however, the fundamental rock of 'ONI = good, people who oppose ONI = bad' that the technicians had built 'their' Spartan on was directly in conflict with the very source of that pain and loss they had used.

Not that she understood or even knew _any _of this of course.

Staggering into the chamber, the other four Spartans in her team raised their weapons in surprise at her entrance, shifting their aim quickly to cover the entrance as they took notice of her state.

Forcing herself forward and _willing _the bizarre pain away that had struck her when she faced the enemy, she moved over to where Ackerson was stomping towards her as her mind cleared. She wondered if they had tried to use some kind of less-than-lethal weapon on her? She knew ONI were always experimenting with new toys...

"Report" Ackerson snapped, taking in her appearance and understanding something had happened.

"Sir, the hostiles â€| previously reported â€| are outside the entrance" she bit out, centering herself, fighting through the dizzy, painful feelings through sheer willpower.

The other cursed.

"Any sign of the rest of your unit?"

"No sir" she said as she stoically endured her throbbing headache. _What the hell did they hit me with? _"I was not able to even start to make contact when I ran into the enemy".

"Then we must assume they are lost" Ackerson decided with a sigh, pausing as his gaze wandered over her face, clearly wondering about her helmet before he continued turning away, clearly dismissing it for now. "Thoughtful Contemplation" he called to the Monitor, "_now _would be a good time to get us out of here" he instructed it, gesturing the other Spartans to close up with them.

The Monitor 'looked' up from where it was working. A thin beam of blue energy connected it to the Slipspace Crystal they had come to retrieve, causing it to spin and reshape itself like the oddest puzzle she had ever seen as it hovered in the air on its own. Like a lock being opened...

"I am initiating the slipspace retrieval sequence now Reclaimer. The process should take ten of your seconds" the eternally happy Monitor replied. "Please remain stationary".

"Colonel, what's going on, _what _hostiles are out there?" Doctor Chalmers protested from somewhere in the huddle. "Are the Covenant out there?"

"Explanations will be provided in due course Doctor" Ackerson dismissed her. "I suggest you concern yourself with bracing for this".

Yellow light started to swirl around them, the crystal itself starting to also glow with the light. Movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention - and reflexively, she raised her rifle as the opposing Spartan team poured out of the dark tunnel as one group. All of them turning _their _weapons their way.

Including several heavy weapons that would make mincemeat of their tightly packed formation.

"_Colonel Ackerson" _a loud strong voice thundered from the speakers of one of them even as her own team raised their own weapons in reply - but by a miracle no-one was firing. _"By direct order of Admiral-""_

Then everything went golden as energy washed over her - until a second later it washed back to nothing, revealing the cargo bay of their prowler in orbit.

17:00 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /

USS Odyssey. Reach Orbit, Epsilon Eridani System.

The billet of Commander In Chief, Stargate Command or CICS GC, was one of the oddest postings in the US military.

Beyond the _blindingly _obvious differences of dealing with alien technology powers and the new reality of engagement through the Milky Way Galaxy and beyond, it was odd in that a frontline command of a little over five hundred personnel warranted a two star General in command. There were of course many reasons why the rank was justified for the post, but it put George Hammond, Jack O'Neill and now Hank Landry into the oddest position of directly coordinating and leading the troops on the front line. Knowing their names, understanding their hopes and dreams â€| and writing the truth as lies to their families when some inevitably fell on world's halfway across the Galaxy.

Unlike the vast bulk of Flag officers in the US Military, he simply didn't have the luxury of maintaining emotional distance from the men on the front line â€| because he _was _on the front line with them, even as he equally needed to fight political battles in the halls of Washington.

One of the hardest things Hank Landry had to do after accepting Jack's offer of a 'job you won't believe' was to re-learn how to maintain some level of emotional distance from people he worked with day in and day out. It had he knew earned him something of a reputation as a hardass of a General at times, especially when compared to Jack O'Neill's understandably close links to the officers and men of the SGC he had fought alongside for the best part of a decade. But if he was to be able to lead and lead effectively, he needed to be able to send some of the finest damn men and women he had ever served with to their death, without a second thought, if the mission warranted it.

It didn't mean that he didn't churn inside every time he ordered a team offworld on a high-risk mission that some or all of them might not come back from, mind you.

But he would never dare show it.

So when Colonel Carter suddenly shouted out in alarm, all he did externally was to glance up from the stocktake report from the ship's quartermaster he had been reading, barely raising an eyebrow in reaction.

"Yes Colonel?"

"Sir, I just detected another radiation surge" the Colonel explained from the systems-operations console next to Marks, gesturing towards the ships main display screen on the left of the bridge, where readings and readouts jumped around like a hyperactive child on Christmas morning for a few days before suddenly flatlining. "But _this _time when it faded back down, the background energy signature zeroed out entirely - I have the subspace transponders of Colonel Mitchell's team back again" Carter cut herself off, before smiling. "All of them are showing as active Sir - and moving. And with the energy field gone, I can get a clear reading on the underground terrain".

"Let's see it" he ordered, standing and walking over towards the screen. Carter worked her board for a few seconds and the scientific jumble flicked off, to be replaced by an isometric view of the region.

"Well I'll be damned" he muttered to himself in a sotto voice. CASTLE base was off to the side, the wild network of mining tunnels and spreading out from under it clearly visible. Somewhat to the North was a _massive _chamber, sitting where until now all that had been visible was the blurry smudge signifying the energy distortion scrambling their sensor returns. "How the hell did the UNSC miss _this _thing?"

it was clearly a rhetorical question, but Carter answered it anyway.

"The energy signature while visible to the Asgard systems would have played hell with ground penetrating radar or sonar" she explained, continuing to work her console as the image rotated to display the huge facility in increasing detail. "It's like how we missed the Ancient cavern under Glastonbury Tor-"

"_Thank _you _Colonel_" he silenced the other with a pointed tone in his voice as he studied the image, the six green transponders flashing on it moving slowly towards the perimeter of the chamber. "Well, it's progress. We'll need to -"

"General" Marks cut into his commentary urgently. "I'm getting a signal from Colonel Mitchell over the subspace link".

"Put it through" Landry ordered, quickly marching back to his command chair as a _click_ sounded from the bridge speakers, tapping the button on his chairs armrest to bring his microphone into the loop as he reached it. "Colonel, good to hear your voice, we just saw the radiation signature cut out from up here. I presume your mission has been successful?"

"_Not exactly Sir - and you may want to get Admiral Hood on the line as well" _the Colonel's voice came through - and even from orbit it sounded a little grim. _"We have a bit of a problem hereâ€¦|"_

17:03 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /

ONI Prowler **_Veiled Night**_**. Low Orbit, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.**

James Ackerson ripped his helmet off as soon as the swirling golden energy faded away to nothing.

No matter how many generations of the damn things the techs built and 'perfected', every model of the things he had worn since basic training _still _felt about as comfortable as wearing an iron pot on his head.

How in the hell the Spartan IIs did it â€| well, they hardly counted as human anyway.

"_Colonel, good to see you back_" the sibilant voice of Harpy, the AI he had been assigned for this mission came over the ship's speakers moments after what remained of his team finished materializing. _"And I see you brought our â€| _guest _back as well". _

Ackerson ignored the comment as he set his helmet down on top of a packing crate in the bay alongside his rifle. Ever since the Forerunner monitor had 'ambushed' him back at Jericho, the ONI AI had been all but sulking where their friend was concerned. If because it had been so easily shunted aside by 'Thoughtful Contemplation' (while the lowly humans saved the day simply by pulling out a cable) or if it just outright didn't _trust _it, he didn't know.

Either way, the trip from Jericho to Reach had partially involved an AI pissing contest that had made him _very _grateful that he had spent most of it in cryo-stasis.

"_I take it you recovered 'it'?" _the AI inquired with an almost-sigh after he didn't deign to answer it's implied question.

Ackerson turned, walking over to where the Forerunner Crystal was being examined by Chalmers â€| hovering a good meter off the deck on its own without a care in the world. _Incredible_.

"Yes I did" he smiled, looking around the bay at the assembled Spartans and technical crew. The former looking as implacable as they always did, the later slightly more shaken as they too removed their helmets. "All of you, my thanks. we've sacrificed much, but the key to final victory over the Covenant is now within our grasp. Chalmers, stay a moment. Everyone else, dismissed".

The Spartans saluted him in perfect unison and turned to start ushering out the technical teams - all of whom looked slightly shaken by the events, but otherwise obeyed for now on autopilot, clearly trying not to think about the last minute events before they had been transported up.

He'd deal with the consequences of that later.

Soon enough they were alone - even the Forerunner Monitor floating off out the door to do whatever it was want to to. He still didn't entirely _trust _it, but after it had blown up its home, taking most of a Covenant fleet with it to join him on this mission, he was inclined to give it a degree of leeway â€| what the hell was Chalmers saying?

He thought she was talking to Harpy, some kind of nonsense phrase that sounded like 'Laputan Machine' and he turned to ask her what the

hell she was saying...and froze.

Mostly because she was pointing an M6C-SOCOM pistol at him.

James Ackerson was a very experienced field operative, with a lifetime of experience running and being run by black operations units and intelligence units. He had not given Chalmers so much as a second look since she had shown up; clearly she wouldn't be here if Parangosky didn't _want _her here. And she had been nothing but a highly useful -if moderately annoying- field scientist who was about as much of a threat to him as a soft teddy bear.

No more.

This wasn't Chalmers doing something very _very _stupid and impulsive, a look of terror mixed with desperate intent as she tried to be a hero or something silly like that to stop him.

No, facing him now was a woman with a rock solid gun arm and the cold eyes of a professional killer, who was pointing the silenced weapon at his head as over the speakers in the room, Harpy stuttered and crackled.

"_I don't under...whatâ€|Laput...Laput...mach...UNSC AI override active, Agent Chalmers"._

Ackerson felt his spine freeze at Harpys confused comments, followed by the dull monotone statement of acknowledgement of the others nonsensical code words. The giddy feeling of victory that had been rushing through him since materializing inside the ship in one piece was drained away in moments, replaced by the cold hard alertness of combat readiness. Harpys confused babble could _only _mean that Chalmers had activated a failsafe override code built into the AI. The kind of ONI override codes he knew would lock _everyone _else out of it and turn Harpy essentially into a slave to her instructions, answering _only _to her. Which meant given that Harpy was patched into the ship right now â€| _she_ had just taken control of his ship.

Understandably, such codes were one of the _tightest _kept secrets in the ONI information technology division.

The conclusion he came to was thus both quick and easy.

"So. Section Zero shows itself at last. I must admit, I thought you were all dead?"

He at least had the small pleasure of seeing the tiniest flicker in the others expression at his sudden proclamation of her identity. Perhaps annoyance. Perhaps respect for his quick assertion, he didn't know. But at least it was _something_, a cheap point scored he'd take, refusing to give the other the satisfaction of showing any fear.

Section Zero. The near mythical internal investigative and policing arm of the Office of Naval Intelligence. The answer to 'who watches the watchers' - they were only talked about in whispers by most people inside Naval Intelligence.

As one of Margaret Parangoskys aides and troubleshooters, he knew

_somewhat _more about them than most. Section Zero _had _been an active force inside ONI for centuries, with agents spread through all three Sections of ONI. ONI personnel tapped by the higher levels of Fleet Command to serve as internal spies for them, independent of the more official oversight units. To make sure that ONI was essentially not acting in a way that ran counter to the policies and strategic direction their bosses had set.

Understandably, Margaret had not exactly liked the idea of having an 'official unofficial' secret police watching her every move, knowing that frankly there were things that it was simply better that the Admiralty _didn't _know about for political, legal and operational reasons. Among others.

It had taken her a _great _deal of time and effort to slowly render Section Zero ineffective over her reign, taking full advantage of the significantly beefed up powers and assets ONI had gathered to itself to fight first the Insurrection and then the Covenant to carefully weed out those who might go outside the _official _chains of command - keeping Section Zero away from any of her more 'questionable' projects.

Until now.

"Margaret certainly tried - and where she missed us, the Covenant generally didn't" the other admitted, her gun held exactly on target center mass but well out of any possible range to grapple or lunge. He _was _still wearing his armor, but even if the first shot didn't penetrate the sheer force would throw him down to the floor without question.

And the next one after that would surely be put through his head.

"But there are still a few of us left. We've had to spread our attention very thin, but _you _were always someone we kept tabs on. Harpy" she then added, "overload the adaptive camouflage skin and initiate special code nineteen".

"_Yes...Agent Chalmers" _the AI agreed in the dull voice and then the ship shuddered slightly at its smart skin powered down - and then alarms went off across the ship as obeying its instructions despite its desperate attempts _not _to, Harpy shut down the Prowlers stealth systems.

"So, your orders were to let me recover the crystal and _then _screw me over?" he asked, folding his arms across his chest and glaring at her while hoping she didn't see _where _his right hand folded under his arm ended up...

"No, my orders were to watch and step in if you decided to act against the UEG-

"Then why the hell are you stopping me?" he demanded in anger, rolling his eyes theatrically. "You know _exactly_ what I'm trying to do! We can end this war _tomorrow _Chalmers-

"Yes we can - but at a staggering cost" she rebutted. Good, she was trying to argue the point with him, rather than just shoot him like any pragmatic ONI agent should have done after blowing their cover.

That gave him room to work with - but he had to move _fast_. Even without its active camouflage his prowler was quite stealthy, but with half of Second Fleet in spitting distance probably scanning for anything even _remotely_ looking like a threat. Thankfully, thanks to ONI paranoia, there were limits to what the AI's on their ships could do, with manual overrides he had no doubt the crew were frantically activating, but even so...

>"That's a call that needs to be made by the people at the top.
Not by you, feeding your ego that you are the one Hard Man capable of making Hard Decisions to save mankind!"

"Without my 'hard decisions' and others like me willing to make them, mankind would have been dead years ago at the hands of the Covenant" he dismissed her protest scornfully. "Instead I brought us years of time, time enough for _this_. _We're in this war for the species Chalmers, the Covenant made that damn well clear at Harvest. And if I have to sacrifice millions to save billions, or billions to save the human race from _extinction"-_

"Please" Chalmers sighed, "spare me the supervillain ends verses means riff" she gestured for him to move to the side - and he did so, taking the opportunity to move his arms back to his side and starting to count backwards from five, holding his glare at her. "Point is, I was monitoring your transmissions down on Reach; I _know_ Admiral Hood has ordered you to stand down and report to him. You can try to explain why you think you're qualified to determine the destiny of the Galaxy to _him_ _by_ all means, but I wouldn't count on -"

And as he reached zero, he squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself and flung the flash grenade he had palmed when crossing his arms straight at Chalmers.

A jackhammer slammed into his chest as Chalmers fired on reflex at his action, hitting him exactly centre mass as her training dictated. The heavy armor plates of his enhanced SPC armor did their job exactly as designed, but the momentum was still _hell_, sending him flying back to the deck as the grenade initiated with a loud hissing. Feeling the wind knocked out of him, he rolled left on memory and heard the distinct ripping hammering sound of silenced rounds deflecting off the metal deck as he opened his eyes. Even with his eyes shut and looking away, the flash grenade had left his vision filled with purple spots but he pushed past it, yanking his backup weapon from its concealed holster with the smoothness of long practice and experience, lining it up on Chalmers blurry head as best he could as she tried to recover from the painfully blinding attack, firing blindly where she thought he was - and pulled the trigger rapidly.

The holdout pistol only held four shots and for a heart stopping moment as he furiously blinked to clear his eyes, he thought he had missed - then Chalmers toppled to the deck with a clatter, her face a bloody mess.

Throwing the pistol to the side with a sense of disgust, he hauled himself to his feet and stared down at the lifeless agent for a moment, actually feeling a slight pang at the senseless waste.

"Too bad Agent Chalmers" he muttered. "You _could_ _have_ been a living hero, instead of joining the list of all the dead ones".

Then with a hiss, the door the cargo bay opened behind him.

"Sir we have a proâ€¦" the voice cut off suddenly behind the sound of safeties being snapped off as a pair of Spartan IIIs entered the room, at once falling into combat mode and thundering across the deck to him, their rifles pointed at the body on the floor.

"It's okay, it's okay, we're clear" he held up a hand, fighting for composure at how close he had come to dying as the Spartans swept their weapons around the room rapidly, looking for a threat before they settled down. "She was a mole, triggered something in Harpy".

"Sir, you're hit!" the Spartan exclaimed, seeing the still slightly smoking hole in his chest plate.

"It didn't penetrate, just a hell of a bruise" he waved the other off as they moved in to examine the damage, refusing to wince at the ache he was feeling as he forced air back into his lungs. "SITREP?" he bit out.

"Sir â€¦ Harpy just activated a termination protocol and deleted himself - _after _shutting down the active camouflage matrix". The other didn't flinch away from the look of fury Ackerson could see reflected in the others golden visor. "We're being scanned by several ships and stations of Second Fleet and are being hailed".

Ackerson considered it a great triumph that he successfully resisted the urge to ask for a weapon to put another half dozen rounds in Chalmers face at that news. He had the Focusing crystal true, but all his contacts, assets, account numbers; near _everything_ he needed to operate off the grid and complete his mission â€¦ had been encoded into Harpy for this mission.

And had just been lost.

No matter.

He'd adapt and find a way forward. He'd certainly done more with less in the past and he wasn't going to give up. Not now.

"The communications array is still locked down, correct?" he snapped as he forced himself to start moving towards the ship's bridge, pushing aside everything but the need to deal with the here and now, his mind working rapidly to plot his path out of this hole.

"Yes Sir" the other confirmed. Per his orders and standard ONI covert prowler procedure, no communications were being accepted from any source outside of his vetted team - which at least meant that no-one would be talking to outsiders without his permission.

"Well that's something anyway. And send a detail to throw that body overboard" he added jerking his head back towards the cargo bay as he made his way up the cramped passage to the ship's bridge as the ship's general alarm started to sound.

17:20 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /

USNC **_Pillar of Autumn**_

****Outbound Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.****

"She's making a break for it!"

"Stay with her Ensign- but keep abeam. Aki, keep your scans up and focused, I _don't _want to pick up a hornet mine for a hood ornament".

"Already on it Boss"

"Aye Sir!"

Jacob Keyes tried not to grin at the slightly less than formal response from his helmsman compared to his by-the-book XO as he pushed the _Pillar of Autumn _for all she was worth, making the cruiser move and dance like a ship her size had no right to as she steadily ground down the distance between her and her target.

Sitting behind the helm in his chair and studying the 'smart glass' wall displaying the sensor track of their target, he couldn't help but feel a slight thrill at the unexpected chase playing out. He had been keeping half an eye on the events of the ground through Lieutenant Haversons reports to the bridge from the GROUNDCOM room, but had been understandably surprised -and mildly alarmed- when Admirals Hood and Stanforth had walked onto his bridge with no more warning than the surprised Marine guard yelling out 'COMMANDER FLEETCOM, COMMANDER ONI, ON THE BRIDGE!'.

It was 'fun' enough having the Commander in Chief and (acting) head of the Office of Naval Intelligence _both _using your ship as their de facto flagship without so much as a 'by your leave' (not that either of them _needed _one to be perfectly fair). But things then got even more 'fun' when after they had returned his hasty salute, Hood had ordered an immediate lockdown of _all _Reach orbital space over FLEETCOM-7, also ordering a full sensor sweep and visual checking of _any _contacts returned anywhere around Reach by all available ships.

Keyes _could _have pointed out the ridiculousness of the order of course; that with Reach space so congested with space debris from the Covenant attack it was going to take a very _very _long time to check every single sensor return €| but he had no desire to make the very junior officer's mistake of speaking truth to power.

Besides, a look at Hoods face told him that the Admiral _knew _perfectly well he was asking the impossible, but was giving the order anyway for reasons he didn't need to know about. And that was that.

But perhaps they had finally had the luck balance sheet swing their way for once - because he had barely started to plot out a search pattern when Lieutenant Hall had suddenly announced a popup target on his long range scopes in low orbit, just short of the horizon. Appearing literally in the middle of nowhere far below the majority of debris, a direct focus by the active sensors had at once caused Hood and Stanforth to snap up and pay attention; the image resolving quickly into that of an ONI _Razor _class Prowler perfectly silhouetted against the planet's clouds as the ships optics had locked in on the contact. One that wasn't part of Second Fleet.

For whatever reason, its active camouflage system had failed. And even if it got it back now, it was far, far too late to try and hide. With damn near every active sensor on every warship, space station and ground array that had a line of sight focusing their attention on the target there was enough EM radiation bathing the target right now that you could probably cook an egg on its outer hull if you wanted to. Prowlers could vanish against space if no-one knew it was there, but if you did know where it was, they had exactly one option for survival in the face of the enemy.

And this one exercised it.

Like a cat caught in the night by a spotlight, the startled Prowler had at once made a run for it and like a pack of hounds chasing a fox, the fleet had responded to Hoods trumpet call and thundered into pursuit. Hundreds of fighters looking on the TACMAP like an angry hornet's nest had been flung into motion as Hood snapped out rapid orders, spreading out to close a net in and around the target to limit its freedom of movement and try to keep it pinned against Reach. She was fast though -faster than any ship that size had a right to be- and clearly not going to give up easily. Worse, her Captain clearly knew exactly what he was doing, threading a spectacular course using debris fields, orbital infrastructure and the bulk of the planet to block the approach some ships and dodge fighter units trying to herd them after it became clear from the first warning shots and broadcast demands to halt their ship that the Fleet wasn't simply going to shoot them down, but wanted them intact.

Riding that razor thin margin for all it was worth, the Prowler had suddenly turned hard around the curve of the planet towards his sector as she built up speed, leaving two Frigates trying to pincer her flat footed, victims of their own inertia. And if she got past him, then they would have a clean run up and out to the jump limit where they could safely engage their slipspace drives before anyone could catch them.

It was a brilliant plan, clearly flawlessly executed to pull a number of warships out of position like a chessmaster thinking three moves ahead to create the opening. And the navigator in Keyes couldn't help but silently salute the enemy Captain for their daring and skill.

But it was a plan with two minor flaws.

First, the enemy had made the (understandable) assumption that the Pillar of Autumn was exactly what she looked like; a stock Halcyon class Heavy Cruiser with perhaps ten percent the thrust of the modern Marathon class Cruisers. And certainly not a ship just retrofitted with a bleeding edge tri-cyclic fusion reactor and a thruster assembly sufficient to push a Super Carrier around.

And second, the assumption that the enemy hadn't caught on to what they were doing until it was too late.

In actual fact, Keyes had guessed at his opponents strategy almost as soon as it was implemented and quickly convinced Hood to let him handle the interception, trying to ignore the look on the others face that said without saying if he screwed this up, his would be the

_shortest _promotion to Admiral in UNSC history. Backing himself, he had ordered the Frigates to overcommit deliberately to put them beyond any ability to adjust their courses and pursue, opening up the hole that the enemy had gladly taken, as Loyal had sluggishly and slowly moved their ship to try and intercept in a perfect simulation of a straining _Halycon_, all but daring them to take the 'hole' in the net 'they' had created...

And then, when they did, slamming his throttle to full.

Now, with his engines at flank speed, his ship was steadily chewing up the distance, despite what had to be a near reactor overload level of thrust burning from the Prowler that was taking years off its engine life every minute.

There was no way it could get clear now â€¦ but it was still running.

And _that _made him worried.

"Optimal deployment range in two minutes, fifteen seconds Captain" Loyal called out, bringing his attention away from the sensor readout of the enemy ship.

"Time till they hit the proximity limit?" he called back, glancing at the NAV chart.

"If they can maintain this thrust? Eight minutes, thirty seconds absolute minimum, more like ten minutes if they want a more than fifty fifty shot at not causing a slipspace rupture inside their own ship".

"Then why the hell is he still running? He's got to know he can't get out" Stanforth murmured from next to him, standing on the 'Captain's Walk' just next to the inactive holotank where the ship's AI would project from when present, unknowingly voicing his own concern. "He's stubborn, but he's not stupid. He has to know there is no way out, it's time to fold and win whatever concessions he can for coming along quietly. Or, contact us and tell us to back off or he'll blow up whatever it is he took - why the hell is he maintaining radio silence?"

"We'll find out soon enough" Hood shrugged slightly, clearly at as much of a loss as he glanced at one of the open COM windows on the smart glass in front of him. "Gold Leader, status?"

"_Sir, we are ready for deployment on your mark_" the Spartan II -Joseph-122 by his tag- confirmed. Down in the launch bay the ten remaining combat-ready Spartan IIs available to the _'Autumn_ were suited up for Zero-G combat, ready on the Zero-G booster frames to launch a forced boarding action once they reached optimal range. Hoods initial hope that they could simply use the _Odysseys_ _incredible 'beaming' technology to put a boarding party on the ship and take it from the inside had been dashed when General Landry had reported that whatever it was James Ackerson had taken from the alien facility, it was continuing to generate some kind of radiation that was highly disruptive to their beaming technology.

Enough to make it a fifty-fifty shot if they could get a team through - intact. And no-one really felt like testing those odds.

General Landry was keeping his incredible ship close behind though, the much smaller ship almost casually matching his acceleration. It _could_ have easily intercepted Ackerson, but such was the power of his weapons that Landry when asked wasn't at all confident he could disable the Prowler without causing catastrophic damage, quite possibly destroying the very thing they were all trying to recover. Accordingly, he had consented to a reserve position. If somehow Ackerson got past the _Autumn_, he would have the final shot to try and stop them before they reached the jump limit.

And yet Ackerson continued to runâ€¦|

The always paranoid Stanforth had voiced the opinion earlier that this was an unmanned decoy; that he had used the same alien tech he had used to vanish from CASTLE Base to evacuate his ship, after pulling the fleet out of position chasing it everywhere. Letting him get out on another ship with a more subtle exit. Probably after faking his death with a self destruct sequence or something just because that was the way he seemed to roll.

However General Landry had confirmed that his ship's sensors were detecting several dozen life signs on board the ship - and the radiation signature was still present and strong. Which at the least meant that what they needed was on boardâ€¦|

Keyes shrugged as he watched his ship close the distance, aligning to pull alongside the enemy. Whatever the answers Hood and Stanforth wanted, they'd have them soon enough.

****17:20 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /****

****ONI Prowler **_**Veiled Night**_**. Low Orbit, Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.****

"Damnit Monty, we need more power to the engines!" Ackerson snapped.

"_I'm giving it everything we've got Colonel!_" the voice of the ship's chief engineer came back, barely audible over the screaming of a ship's fusion plant running at the absolute limit over the COM. "_Anything more and we'll melt the thruster manifold right through!_"

"The _'Autumn _is shifting trajectory, their increasing thrust _again _and moving to come up alongside us" the ship's tactical officer warned, disgust colouring her voice at the unexpected power of the massive warship chasing them down. "Looks like they're moving into range for a boarding action..."

"At _these _speeds?" the ship's Captain shot an incredulous look at the officer before shaking his head and muttering something under his breath. "All hands" he declared over the PA, "stand by to repel boarders". Turning, the Captain offered him a dark glare, clearly irritated by his refusal to just give up and surrender or unlock the COM system to parlay with their pursuit, a position enforced by the presence of two armed Spartan IIIs standing behind the Colonel and loyal to _him_. "Colonel" he tried again in a softer voice, "we're out of options. We won't make the proximity limit even in a straight line before they shoot out our engines!"

"And until they do, they do - _maintain course_" he ground out and the other exhaled in exasperation before turning back to his navigation displays. Ackerson glared at his own the tactical repeater display at his station at the rear of the bridge as if through sheer willpower he could cause the cruisers sublight engines to blow a fuse or something, the smaller but infinitely more dangerous human ship from the alternate reality following close behind her. Luckily they seemed to be content to let the UNSC take the lead here, unwilling to get involved in this matter despite their clear interest in it.

It was a small favor he thanked the universe for, but it seemed ultimately irrelevant. The Captain was right, the UNSC cruiser was just about to run over the top of them, _any _attempt at a course change would just let it close the distance that much faster as much as his heart rallied against the idea of throwing in the towel, it looked like he was about out of op-

"Reclaimer!" a voice voice entered the debate, Ackerson spinning to watch as Thoughtful Contemplation entered the bridge, gaining the attention of the crew quickly as it looked around before focusing on him and floating over to him, the bright light of its 'eye' flashing rapidly in time with its words. "This vessel's engines are under considerable stress - we _must _engage our trans-light capabilities immediately".

"We can't, not for another three minutes" the navigator hastily pointed out - perhaps worried that he would think he was lying or trying to help the UNSC ship following them. "Not until we clear the gravity well proximity limit!"

The Monitor didn't respond directly, instead floating forward to one of the consoles that the ship's AI usually ran through - shooting a beam of blue light into it that caused the crewman nearby there to yelp and cringe back.

"Colonel-" the Captain started to protest in alarm.

"Let it be" Ackerson waved the other distractedly, staring at the Monitor as it seemed to work for a few seconds, before the beam cut off and it spun around.

"Oh - I see, your crude translight capabilities are not able to compensate for the reconciliation disruptions to the underlying spatial strata" the decide exclaimed in sudden understanding, sounding remarkably happy over the fact. "There is no need to fear; the focusing crystal in the presence of an active field of what you call 'slipspace' will automatically mediate our transit no matter the external gravitational influence!"

"_What?_" the ship's Captain spluttered. Ackerson ignored him, focusing his full attention on the Forerunner Monitor.

"You're saying" Ackerson said quickly but carefully, "that if we engage our slipspace engines _now, _the crystal will let us jump from _this _deep in the gravity well?"

"Indeed".

"And you couldn't have told me before now becauseâ€¦?" he asked,

barely holding his temper in check. The time wasted making their attempted escape!

"You did not ask Reclaimer" the Monitor pointed out, leaving Ackerson speechless for the first time in a long time, before he just shook his head and grinned.

"...fair point - Captain, engage the slipspace drive at _once!_"

"Colonel you can't believe this thing!" the Captain spluttered, fear written all over his suddenly pale face. Slipspace accidents were a thing terrify any spacer - with unpredictable side effects from engaging a slipspace engine in the wrong place at the wrong time. If you were _lucky_, an unstable rupture would just scatter your body in a few trillion pieces across a few light years of deep space. If you were _unluckyâ€|_

"Sir if we activate the drive now-"

"Captain" he said in a voice as cold as deep space, made more terrible in the way the two Spartans behind him shifted slightly, their weapons coming up fractionally to a more ready position. "Engage. The. Drive".

The other set his jaw, but deflated quickly, turning to face his crew.

"Helm, power up slipspace drive and engage".

"...aye sir" the helmsmen confirmed, swallowing once as he reached for the FTL board and started the power up cycle.

"_James Ackerson" _a new voice came over his headset, flashing as a priority channel on his board. The ship's COM system was directly linked to his station now, although so far most of what had come through had just been demands to stand down from various Captains he had ignored.

This voice however...

"_This is Terrence Hood" _the voice coming from the ship chasing them confirmed his identity. _"Final warning Colonel; stand down, surrender whatever you took from Reach and surrender your ship. I give you my word the court martial will be fair and show leniency, letting you explain your actions in full. But if you do _not _comply, I _will _give the order to use lethal force against you"_.

Well it didn't get any more clear than that. A direct order from the ultimate military and civilian authority in the UEG personally given to him to stand down.

It was far too late for that though.

Humanity couldn't afford for him to fail or falter now.

"My apologies Admiral, but I have a mission to complete" he responded over the same frequency as he listened to the sound of the ships drives powering up to activation levels â€| and the fear in the navigation officer as he counted down to activation. "I will gladly

submit my actions to history's judgement and vindication â€| but _not
_yours".

Cutting the channel, he braced himself as a blue portal ripped open
in front of their ship.

Vindication or death.

17:22 Hours, September 23rd, 2552 (Military Calendar) /

USNC **_Pillar of Autumn**_

Outbound Reach, Epsilon Eridani System.

"Captain, he's powering up his slipspace drives - and activating
them!" Hikowa suddenly shouted as proximity alarms sounded across the
bridge.

"Loval, back off - back off!" Keyes snapped and all across the bridge
people staggered as the ship's emergency thrusters ignited, pushing
the Autumn away from the relatively tiny Prowler they had just about
moved up next to as its massive engines pivoted, accelerating them
away as the Ensigns hands danced over his controls.

"He's crazy, we're still well inside the jump limit" Hall
spluttered.

"_Hood, we're detecting a massive spike in the radiation signature!"
_Keyes heard the voice of General Landry who was still linked into a
conference call with Hood from behind him. "_It's much bigger than
before!"_

"The ruptures forming!" Hall called out and on the ships sensor
display, a blue portal materialized in front of the Prowler. Blue
waves of energy seemed to pulse down the skin of the ship as it
approached the portal.

"Sir, do we engage?" he asked urgently looking at Hood - but it was
pointless as even as Hood opened his mouth to answer, the Prowler
shot forward into the portal and vanished as the portal swirled
closed behind them.

"Track his vector" Keyes snapped, leaning forward urgently. "Talk to
me Loval, is he going anywhere near anything?"

"...no sir" the other responded glumly after a few seconds. "His
track is straight through open space off the edge of the
charts".

"How long until we can jump?"

"At least six minutes Sir - and by that time-"

"-his wake would have dissipated" Keyes finished, fighting the sudden
sense of failure as he set his face.

"Sir I have one contact - it looks like they dumped something
overboard just before jumping â€| sirs" Hall looked across at the
trio of Admirals, surprise and confusion on his face, "it looks like
a _body"_.
_.

"Well we might get at least some answers from it" Keyes noted, turning to the flight ops officer. "Launch the search and rescue Pel - no" he interrupted his own order with a raised hand as he recalled whom he was dealing with. "Have a Marine EOD team report to the SAR bird, _then _launch it to recover the body. Make sure it's clean before we bring it back on board and put it through full decon. Ensign, bring the ship about and commence a deceleration burn for Reach orbit".

"Aye Sir!" the flight-ops officer nodded and went to work at once.

"Aye Sir" Loyal acknowledged the order professionally, but without terribly much enthusiasm - and Keyes could well understand that feeling.

Keyes couldn't help but feel that they had just lost a very important race - one that would come back to haunt them in the future.

"I'm sorry Admirals, General" he finally turned to his superiors and their ally on the screen in front of him, unable to put off the inevitable any longer. "We've lost him".

And that ends the Reach Arc.

>The next chapter will be a timeskip chapter, cutting across several weeks of time in-universe to set up the second half of this story. And it'll probably only be like a quarter this damn monsters size, dealing with both the Covenant side of things and UNSCSCGC side of things.

Hope it cleared up one or two things (and opened up twice as many lines of questions)

Peace, out!

End
file.